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STAR TREK THE NEXT GENERATION®

#61

DIPLOMATIC IMPLAUSIBILITY

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By Keith R.A. DeCandido

HISTORIAN'S NOTE

This novel takes place shortly after "What You Leave Behind," the final episode of Star Trek Deep Space Nine, and several months after the movie Star Trek Insurrection. This would place it at approximately Stardate 53000 in the Starfleet dating system, at the cusp of the 2375/2376 new year on the Earth calendar, and about midway through the year 1001 on the Klingon calendar.

Prologue.

Captain klag's right arm itched.

Since he had lost that arm six months previously in battle against the Jem'Hadar, this irritated him.

"Status," he said. He was sitting in the captain's chair on the bridge of the I. K S. Gorkon--one of the newest ships in the Klingon Defense Force, and also Klag's first command.

His first officer, Commander Drex, was standing next to Lieutenant

Rodek at the gunner's post behind Klag. Drex walked to the fore of the bridge. "All systems remain at peak operation, Captain," he said in a deep voice that reminded Klag of sandpaper being applied to a rock.

"All department heads report the shakedown cruise a success."

"Good. Is there any reason why we should not return to the Homeworld?"

"No, sk. The Gorkon has performed to all expectations." Klag smiled at that

"In that case, Commander, let us begin our mission in earnest."

Drex nodded. "Yes, sir." The commander turned to the helm position.

"Set course for Qo'nos."

The pilot, a lieutenant named Leskit, said, "And at what speed would the commander like me to wend our way homeward?" Klag sighed. He'd been warned about Leskit, who had been assigned to the Gorkon while the Rotarron was being repaired. But, despite his irritating demeanor, he was an excellent pilot, and Klag had found no cause for complaint in his performance. As for his attitude ... Well, he thought, perhaps he will be transferred back to the Rotar ran after the shakedown. If he is not--I will deal with it.

Drex barked, "You will speak when spoken to, Lieutenant! Set course as ordered!"

If Leskit was bothered by Drex's tone, he didn't show it. "Yes, sir.

Setting course zero-six-seven mark one-nine, sir"

"Execute at full impulse until we have cleared the star system, then go to Warp 7."

"It is my humble duty to do as the son of Martok orders," Leskit said, voice dripping with sarcasm. Drex merely snarled in reply.

Klag looked around at his bridge. The Gorkon was the first of the new gang-class vessels, one of many ships that had been commissioned in the last few years in support of the war effort against the Dominion. The bridge had a more-or-less standard Defense Force design. The captain's chair was located front and center, with a small space between it and the main viewscreen. The helm was located immediately to the captain's left, with the operations and tactical consoles immediately behind him, and various other stations in the rear. Klag found the design practical--it put the most important systems, navigation, weapons, and sensors, closest--though he would have put the helm behind the captain with the other two instead of to the left. To the right lay the entrance to the captain's office, with the main bridge entrance in the rear.

Standard design, yes, but with the newest and best equipment.

And, according to Drex, it had passed all the tests they'd put it through on the shakedown and was ready to begin its mission.

Klag looked at Drex. "Commander?"

"Sir?" Klag sighed. "With the successful completion of the shakedown, I believe there is a duty you must perform."

Drex nodded. "Of course, sir." He turned to Lieutenant Rodek at the tactical station. "Gunner, commence the record of battle."

Rodek nodded, and retrieved an ornate padd from under his console.

Formally, he said, "I, Rodek, son of Noggra, gunner for the ship Gorkon, commence the record of battle for this ship on the one hundred and ninety-second day in the year of Kahless, 1001. May it be filled with exploits of glory and honor and be worthy of your leadership."

He handed the padd to Drex, who took it, thumbed it, then looked at Klag. "The record of battle has commenced, sir."

Then a klaxon went off.

"Report," Klag barked.

"Shields have been raised," said Rodek. "Sensors are detecting an explosive device ten qell'qams off the starboard bow."

"Destroy it," Klag said, then turned to the second officer, Kegren, who stood at the operations station to Rodek's left. "Why was this not detected sooner, Lieutenant?" Kegren said, "The bomb is located in the debris of a Breen ship. This area was the site of a battle--"

"I'm aware of that, Lieutenant." The fact that a Breen Klingon battle had occurred in this star system during the Dominion War was precisely why Klag chose the locale. The debris and excess radiation provided navigation and sensor hazards that would make good tests of the Gorkon's capabilities. "Answer the question."

"The bomb did not activate until we came within fifteen qeu'qams. Until then, it simply registered as random debris that would easily be deflected by our navigation shields."

"Quantum torpedoes locked on target, Captain," Rodek said.

Klag stood up and looked at Kegren as he said to Rodek, "Fire."

"Torpedo away," Rodek said.

Turning toward the viewscreen, Klag saw the torpedo strike the debris.

The resultant explosion was felt by the Gorkon.

"Damage report," Klag barked.

"Shields held--barely. Had we been any closer, we might have lost them and suffered hull damage," Rodek said. "However, the explosive has been destroyed."

Not exactly a stirring beginning to our record of battle, Klag thought.

Turning back to Kegren, he said, "This ship is supposed to have the best sensors available in the Defense Force. Yet we could not detect a threat to the ship until it was less than fifteen qeu'qams away. Why is this, Lieutenant?"

"The Breen--"

"Sir, " an ensign from the secondary operations station behind Rodek. "I warned Lieutenant Kegren of the possible danger. He chose to ignore it. My logs will bear out my word, Captain."

Kegren spit. "Ensign Toq is young and foolish--he sees jatyln behind every meteor, ready to eat his heart." Kegren punctuated his insult with a chuckle.

No one joined in the chuckle. Klag continued to stare at his second officer.

"Captain--" Kegren started.

Toq walked forward, unsheathing his d'k tahg. "Kegren, son of Pers, you have dishonored yourself by endangering this vessel and the warriors who serve on it. I challenge you for the right to serve as second officer of the Gorkon."

Kegren turned to Klag. "Captain, tell this petaq to go back to his playpen. I don't have time for these--"

"You have been issued a challenge, Lieutenant," Klag said. "You will answer it, or I will kill you myself." Klag wanted it to be clear that he approved of the ensign's action.

Kegren sighed, and said, "Very well, let us get this insanity over with." He unsheathed his own d'k tahg and went to the fore of the bridge. Toq followed. "You have been a pain in my crest from the moment you reported, infant."

"And you have been an incompetent fool," Toq said, holding his d'k tahg in the proper position--ready to strike or parry at a moment's notice.

They made an odd pairing. Toq was young, fresh faced, a mouth full of white teeth, hair only down to his shoulders, and a thin beard that looked like it had only been recently grown. Kegren's hair was longer and grayer, his beard fuller and better trimmed, and was missing several teeth. But, while Kegren looked like he had seen many years, it didn't seem to Klag that he'd lived them. He didn't move like a warrior, he moved like an old man.

Toq lunged, and Kegren easily dodged. Kegren did likewise, and Toq blocked the thrust.

Klag stood next to Drex to observe, as did everyone on the bridge, and whispered to his first officer, "Has Kegren been this--lax throughout the shakedown, Commander?"

"Occasionally, Captain. This is the first time he has endangered the ship. I had intended to file a report on him."

Kegren deflected a d'k tahg thrust of Toq's, but Toq took advantage of Kegren's lowered arm to deliver a hard backhand to the older officer's jaw. Kegren stumbled backward, then straightened, spitting out blood and one of his few remaining teeth.

"But I think Ensign Toq will make that unnecessary," Drex added.

The combatants locked into a wrestling hold. Both of them growled as each tried to subdue the other. Within a few moments, though, Toq's growl grew louder and Kegren's became more of a cry.

Then Toq threw Kegren to the deck, gripped his d'k tahg, and slashed down at Kegren. Blocking the strike with his left arm, Kegren swung his own knife with his right Toq evaded easily, but Kegren gained a moment to get to his feet.

I wonder, Klag thought, looking at his first officer, if you really intended to file that report or not, Commander. Drex. had been completely silent when Klag reprimanded Kegren, and when Toq issued his challenge. But if one of his officers was negligent--as it seemed Kegren was-Drex should have informed Klag of that sooner.

Turning his attention back to the scuffle, the captain noticed that Kegren seemed winded. The fight had gone on for only a few minutes, but Kegren was slowing down noticeably. What self-respecting warrior keeps himself in such poor shape? the captain wondered.

They parried for several seconds more. Toq slashed Kegren's cheek, and blood started to run into the older officer's thick beard, over the

bruise that had already started to form where Toq had struck. The bridge crew had abandoned the pretense of neutrality, and were cheering Toq on, chanting his name. Obviously the lieutenant is not well loved by his comrades.

Kegren lunged clumsily, and Toq sunk his d'k tahg into his opponent's chest.

With a look of shock on his face, Kegren fell to the floor.

The chants of Toq's name from around the bridge grew louder as the young warrior knelt over Kegren's prone form. He turned the body over, removed the bloody d'k tahg from Kegren's chest, and then screamed at the ceiling. There was no need to pry Kegren's eyes open, as they were still quite wide, no doubt from shock at losing to an "infant."

Klag nodded his approval. Whatever his failings in life, Kegren did die a warrior's death, and he deserved the proper death ritual.

"Well done, Toq," the captain said, and his words dimmed the chanting of Toq's name. Walking around to the young man's left side as he stood up, Klag put his hand on Toq's shoulder and said, "Commander Drex."

"Sir!"

"Note in the ship's log that the Gorkon has a new second officer Lieutenant Toq."

"Yes, sir."

The chants of Toq's name started up again, and Klag added his own voice to the tumult.

After ordering Kegren's body to be disposed of, Klag went to his office. Sitting at his computer terminal, having poured himself a flagon of raktajino, he called up the performance reports the crew had written regarding the shakedown, and also the personnel records of both Kegren and Toq.

Kegren's reports, Klag noticed, were lackluster and incomplete.

Lackluster he could live with, but incomplete could get them all killed. Klag fully intended to die in battle with his hands around his enemy's throat, whether literally face to face or metaphorically in ship-to-ship combat--not because an operations officer couldn't be bothered to make sure the lateral sensor array was at peak efficiency.

There was no sign of dissatisfaction from Drex over Kegren's performance.

The price Klag had had to pay for getting a brand-new ship for his first command was that he had no real say in his command crew. The son of Chancellor Martok--with his slight build, wispy moustache, and wide mouth that gave more the impression of a ramjep bird than a warrior was the last person Klag wanted as a first officer, and yet was the one person Klag could not dismiss. Or, if he did, it would need to be for a better reason than simply not wanting a politically powerful first officer. So far, the commander had proven himself competent, but not much more than that. This ship deserves better than competent. And so do I. I have had my fill of those who use their House to make up for their shortcomings.

Still, at least he had command of a brand-new ship. A pity, Klag thought, that it wasn't ready until after the Founders surrendered. It would have been good to take a top-of-the-line ship against the Jem'Hadar, instead of the Pagh ... Just the thought of the Pagh made Klag's right arm itch again, and the memory of its loss resurfaced. The Pagh--which hadn't been top-of-the-line for well over fifteen years--had been destroyed in the Battle of Mar can. Klag, the ship's first officer, was the only survivor, and that survival had cost him his right arm. After the Pagh's crash on Marcan V, Klag single-handedly

(literally) slew several Jem'Hadar and their Vorta leader. As a reward, the Hero of Marcan had been given command of the Gorkon.

Taking a hearty gulp of raktajino, Klag looked over Kegren's service record. It was unspectacular he'd spent most of his career in security on Qo'nos. No reprimands, but no commendations, either--and he had a low rank for someone of his age.

Toq, on the other hand, had indeed filed a report saying that he had suggested a closer examination of the Breen debris, which Kegren had deemed unnecessary. And then Klag checked Toq's personal log, where Toq stated his dissatisfaction with his superior and his intention to challenge Kegren's position should it become necessary.

Klag then looked at Toq's record. The boy had been rescued from a crashed ship in the Carraya system six years previously by Worf, son of Mogh--at the time, the chief of security on the U. S S. Enterprise, and the first Klingon to join the Federation's Starfleet. Toq had been taken in by the House of Lorgh, a friend to Worf's own House, and then joined the Defense Force with the coming of the Dominion War. He served well on both the K'Lonandthegelk.

To Klag's surprise, there was no record of Toq's life prior to his rescue.

Before he could pursue the matter further, the intercom rang out with Drex's voice. "Bridge to captain. We have received a distress call from the planet tad."

Rising from his chair, shutting his computer station down, and swallowing the remainder of his raktajino, Klag left his office.

Entering the bridge, Klag was tempted to once again take the captain's chair, but that would leave him with his back to his officers. When going into battle, that was fine--it showed his position as their leader; it was also a sign of trust, that he was willing to turn his back on them. That was why Klingon vessels had their bridges at the foremost point on the ship. If a commander does not physically lead warriors

into battle by being at the forefront, then that commander does not deserve to be followed.

Now, though, Klag needed information, and that was best gathered face to face.

"What is the nature of the distress call, Commander?" he asked Drex, who was presently standing next to Rodek at the gunner's position.

"Governor Tiral is requesting the assistance of a starship. According to the message, al'Hmatti rebels are attacking his satellite."

Klag was sure those words had meaning, but since he knew nothing of tad, he could not fathom them himself. Still, a distress call from a planetary governor was hardly something he could ignore. "Any other Defense Force ships in the area?"

Drex turned to Toq, who had already added a lieutenant's insignia to his uniform and taken up the operations console.

The new second officer manipulated that console for a moment before replying "The Sompek is two days from tad, but we are less than an hour away, Captain."

"Very well. Inform Command of our course change." Klag turned to Leskit. "Pilot, change course for tad and execute at maximum speed."

"Yes, sir," Leskit said--without, Klag noticed, the sarcasm he gave Drex. The captain filed this discrepancy away for future notice.

Walking around to the operations console, Klag said to Toq, "Tell me about tad, Lieutenant."

"It is a planet in the Korvad system, home to a race known as the

al'Hmatti," Toq said without glancing at the console--obviously, he had looked up the information as soon as they got the distress signal. "The world is almost completely covered in ice, and was conquered two centuries ago. It remained so until four years ago when--" Toq hesitated. "When the al'Hmatti threw off the Klingon overseers."

This news surprised Klag. "Interesting. I presume that we took the planet back?"

"Yes, sir. They only succeeded in the first place because the bulk of the fleet was committed to the invasion of Cardassia. The world was retaken within a year, but there has been continued unrest."

"So it would seem." Klag sighed. "Prepare a full report on tad, Lieutenant." He turned to Leskil "Time to arrival?"

"Fifty-four minutes, Captain," Leskit said.

Klag looked at Drex. "Contact me when we arrive."

"Yes, sir."

"Report," Klag said as he entered the bridge fifty-four minutes later.

"We are approaching tad, Captain," Drex said. "Sensors report that three sublight skimmers are attacking the governor's satellite."

According to the report Toq had compiled, tad was as cold as Rura Penthe. The average equatorial temperature on tad was considerably lower than the average polar temperature on the Homeworld. For that reason, planetary governors preferred to administrate from an orbiting station, which kept a warmer artificial environment far better suited to Klingons.

Klag approached the throne-like captain's chair and lowered himself into it slowly. He had sat in the chair many times during the three weeks he'd been in command of the Gorkon, but he still savored the experience. Perhaps it was vain, but Klag had waited a long time for these moments. He could damn well savor them if he wanted.

"Take us to the battle site, pilot, " Klag said, "attack posture."

"Consider our shoulders raised, Captain," Leskit drawled.

Glancing back to Rodek, Klag said, "Tactical report."

"Only one skimmer is attacking. The second can only move using maneuvering thrusters, but still has weapons capability. The third is fully mobile but has exhausted its phaser banks."

Klag asked, "And the satellite?"

"Shields are at forty percent. Disrupter banks are exhausted and torpedo tubes read empty."

Klag was about to comment on the satellite gunner's inefficiency when Toq chimed in "There is debris consistent with two destroyed skimmers, four qell'qams off the satellite's port bow ."

That's something, anyhow, Klag thought. "Lieutenant Rodek, as soon as we are in range, target the skimmers and destroy them. First the one attacking, then the damaged one, men the maneuverable one."

"Yes, sir," Rodek said, manipulating his controls. "In range now.

Targeting--firing--ship destroyed." Rodek's eyes widened. "Sir, the explosion has caused collateral damage to the satellite's shields.

They're now down to twenty percent--and they have a minor hull breach."

"Why was the captain not told of this possibility?" Drex screamed.

"I--I was simply carrying out orders, Commander," Rodek said.

"Never mind," Klag said. The satelli te was going to need repairs in any case, and at least now the threat was passed. " Proceed, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir. Second ship is firing on us--they missed," Rodek said, with a surprising lack of emotion. Klag noted that as well. "Targeting second ship--firing--it is destroyed, sir."

Toq said, "The third ship is taking evasive maneuvers, Captain."

"Overtake, pilot," Klag said to Leskit. "None of these rebels will live out this day."

"That would indeed be bad, sir," Leskit said. "We will overtake in ten seconds."

"Fire when ready, gunner," Klag said.

Eight seconds later, Rodek reported the third ship destroyed.

Klag nodded. "Excellent" Cheers came from all around the bridge. Our record of battle shall begin with a victory, Klag thought, if a relatively easy one. It was the first true test of the Gorkon's capabilities, and Klag was mostly happy with how his crew had performed.

"Incoming message from Governor Tiral," Toq said, and his voice served to dun some of the cheers.

"On screen."

A round face appeared on the viewscreen, matching that in the records of Governor Tiral. He sat in the midst of a certain amount of chaos in what Klag assumed to be the operations center of the satellite. Behind the governor, Klingons barked orders to what looked like quadrupedal beings--the al'Hmatti. Some of them walked on all fours, others on their hind legs while operating consoles and machinery or carrying things with their forelegs. Some operated machinery with their hind legs, which seemed to be as prehensile as their forelegs. Few wore any kind of clothing, covered as they were in light-colored fur.

"I am Klag, commanding the I. K S. Gorkon."

Eyebrows raised, Tiral said, "The son of M'Raq? Hero of Marca nv

Klag basked in the recognition. "The same."

"It is an honor, Captain. I am Governor Tiral--and I thank you for your aid. I don't know how those rebels got their hands on so many ships, but I intend to find out."

"Do you require any other assistance, Governor?"

"Not for the station, no. We have become quite adept at repairs of late," Tiral said with a snort. "_I_ don't suppose I could convince you to remain here for a few months?"

"Not at present. We are en route to the Homeworld following our shakedown cruise."

"Ah, so you're on one of the new ships. Well, congratulations, Captain. I'm glad that you, at least, have had good fortune."

Tlral sounded bitter--but then, given what Klag had just finished reading about in Toq's report, the captain couldn't blame him. "I take it that the situation with the rebels has deteriorated?"

"That implies that the situation was ever good to begin with. The rebels continue to pick away at us. Worse, they have been crying to the Federation for support, and now there are rumors that the Federation is starting to listen." Tiral spit. "The High Council, meanwhile, refuses to give me the same consideration. My protests have fatten on deaf ears."

Klag did not bother to point out that that was probably due to the fact that the Council, rebuilding the empire after the Dominion War, probably couldn't give tad the attention its governor felt it deserved.

However, that didn't change the fact that tad needed some attention from the empire, especially if the Federation did get involved.

Klag considered. The Battle of Marcan had been a decisive and important victory. Klag's deeds that day had already been immortalized in song, and he'd been rewarded with a fine command. He'd been hailed as a hero of the empire, and there was even talk of his being inducted into the Order of the Bat'leth. People listened to heroes.

"Perhaps, Governor, I can put in a good word for you with the High Council. Mine is a more objective viewpoint. And I believe I can convince them to acknowledge your concerns."

"_I_ would be in your debt if you did so, Captain Klag," Tiral said, sounding very much relieved. "The support of the Hero of Marcan may be what I need to end this insanity once and for all."

"Perhaps," Klag said, trying not to sound too optimistic. He wasn't sure how far his influence went, nor was he entirely sure this was the right place to wield it.

On the other hand, it was ludicrous that mere jeghpu'wl' should be able to mount so thorough an attack against their overseers. Obviously something needed to be done.

And Klag was determined to do it.

"I will be in touch, Governor. Screen off." After Tiral's face disappeared, Klag said, "Pilot, resume course for Qo'nos, maximum warp."

Chapter One.

The human burial ground was a verdant field, stretching as far as the eye could see. A latticework of pathways was superimposed over grass dotted by dozens of beeches, cedars, sugar maples, and massive oaks.

Unlike so many other cemeteries, this one's grave markers were arranged artfully, with as much thought given to aesthetics as functionality.

Instead of a grid-like pattern of straight rows, the graves here had a sense of being placed for a particular purpose, not just to fill the next spot in line. The grave markers themselves--both headstones and mausoleums--were designed with utmost care.

Many famous humans, and a few famous aliens, had chosen Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx on Earth as the resting place for their remains in the five hundred years since a human military officer,

Admiral David Farragut, had been interred here.

Worf suspected that it was for this reason that K'Ehleyr had requested to be buried in this place.

Although raised by humans from the age of six, Worf had never understood the human custom of burying the bodies of the dead. Upon death, the spirit underwent a great journey--hopefully to Sto-Vo-Kor--but the body itself was just a shell. Placing that body in the ground, taking up land that could be better used for almost anything else, had always struck Worf as a waste.

But K'Ehleyr was only half Klingon. Her mother was human, and K'Ehleyr had followed many human customs, including making out a will and leaving instructions for disposition of remains. Klingons didn't have wills their possessions went to their House and their bodies were destroyed.

Coming here, Worf decided, was a mistake. But his foster parents had suggested the visit, and once Sergey and Helena Rozhenko got an idea into their heads, it was best to go along. He had returned to Earth for the first time in several years in order to prepare for his newest challenge Worf, son of Mogh, was now the Federation Ambassador to the Klingon Empire.

K'Ehleyr, the first woman Worf had ever loved, had had that job when she died.

Worf had first met K'Ehleyr over a decade and a half ago, when he was a cadet at Starfleet Academy. They seemed a perfect match, at first the half-breed and the Klingon raised by humans. But they were also young, and ultimately the relationship, like many adolescent relationships, ended badly. When they were reunited aboard the Enterprise six years later, they had come to something like an understanding--and, to Worf's later surprise, conceived a child.

Unfortunately, K'Ehleyr was killed just when she and Worf finally

seemed to resolve their differences. Worf had avenged her death in the proper manner, and had done the best he could to raise their son, Alexander.

And now Worf had her old job.

It had been something of a shock when Admiral Ross offered him the post. With the end of the Dominion War, Worf had expected to resume his duties aboard Deep Space Nine as before, perhaps with a promotion to full commander. Instead, he had been given an awesome responsibility, one of which Worf was not sure he was worthy.

This is useless, Worf thought after staring at the stone grave marker for what seemed to be the fiftieth time. K'Ehleyr is not here. She is in Sto-Vo-Kor--no doubt complaining about the noise all the warriors are making, he thought with an internal smile. All that's here are moldering body pans.

"Hey there, stranger, long time, no see ," said a voice from behind him.

Worf whirled around, arms up in a defensive position --until he recognized the familiar face. "Jeremy?"

"In the flesh," Jeremy Aster said with a big grin.

Worf lowered his arms and approached the young man, his lips curling slightly. "It is good to see you."

"Good to see you, too. I heard you were back on Earth, so I dropped in on Sergey and Helena. They said you came here. I might've been here sooner, actually, but Helena insisted I have some soup before I transported over."

Worf shook his head. No one came into Mother's house without being fed--Worf learned early on that it was practically a natural law.

It had been ten years since Worf last saw Jeremy in person. The twelve-year-old that Worf had made R'uustai with on the Enterprise was now a twenty-two-year-old man. Jeremy's mother, Lieutenant Maria Aster, a ship's archaeologist, had died on an away mission that Worf had led, leaving the boy orphaned. Worf had made Jeremy a part of his family with the R'uustai ritual, and the two had stayed in touch in the intervening years. Jeremy had followed his mother's career in archaeology and was now working on his doctorate at the prestigious Rector Institute.

Indicating the way to the northernmost exit, Worf said, "I was just about to leave. Will you walk with me?"

"Sure. Said all you needed to say to her, huh?"

"Something like that," Worf said, not wanting to go into a diatribe against incomprehensible human death customs.

"Yeah, sometimes I visit Mom and Dad's graves, tell ' how I'm doing.

It's kinda cathartic, y'know?"

Worf was suddenly grateful he had not gone into that diatribe.

"Of course," Jeremy continued, "what I've been doing is pretty dull.

"Hi, Mom, went to school today."

"Hi, Dad, broke up with Marra yesterday.""

"You and Marra have ended your relationship?" Worf asked, surprised.

Jeremy's last several letters had indicated that she was what humans tended to call "the one."

"Long story," Jeremy said, dismissively. "I'm over her. Really."

"Of course," Worf said, trying not to sound dubious.

"But you--you make us all look like we lead dull lives. Your ship's destroyed by the Jem'Hadar, you're captured by the Breen, tortured by the Cardassians, rescued by Cardassia's biggest folk hero, and then for good measure you kill the Klingon chancellor and appoint his replacement, help win the worst war of the last several decades, and get a plum diplomatic assignment. Not bad for six months' work."

"I merely did my duty," Worf said, not really interested in basking in the recognition--especially since Jeremy mentioned that as a way of deflecting the conversation away from his failed relationship.

Jeremy laughed. "Right, all in a day's work. Sure."

"Something like that."

"So, I assume you'll be living on the Klingon Homeworld, right?"

"Yes, at the embassy, though I suspect my duties will keep me traveling."

"What's your next assignment? Or is it some top secret mission us civilians aren't allowed to hear about?" This last was said with a sardonic grin.

"I do not know. I am meeting with Minister T'Latrek tomorrow to discuss it."

"Well," Jeremy said, slapping Worf's shoulder, "I'm sure whatever it is, you'll be brilliant."

"I appreciate your confidence," Worf said. "I can only hope that it is justified," he muttered.

"Hey," Jeremy said, and he stopped walking and looked Worf right in the eye. "I'm serious here. You've taken a lot of garbage in your life, and you've always wound up on top--maybe not right away, but you always end up there eventually. You'll do well here, too." He grinned.

"Trust your brother."

Worf took a deep breath. He had had three brothers in his life. His biological brother, Kurn, now lived a new life under another name, with no memory of ever having been the younger son of Mogh. His adoptive brother, Nikolai Rozhenko, now lived on Vacca VI with the Boraalan people, raising a family. Jeremy was really the only one he had left.

"Perhaps you are right."

"I'm always right."

"Except, it would seem, about Marra."

Jeremy rolled his eyes. "You're not going to let that go, are you?"

"I believe your last few letters mentioned marriage plans." Wincing, Jeremy said, "They did, didn't they?"

"I will not pry if you do not wish to talk further."

Jeremy let out a held breath. "I appreciate that."

"Instead, I will invite you to join me for dinner at my parents'."

" Helena already did," Jeremy said with another grin. "She's making pi pius claw and rokeg blood pie for you, and matzoh ball soup and pirogi for those of us with only one stomach."

Worf returned the slap on Jeremy's back as they approached the transporter station, located by a huge linden tree near the north entrance to the cemetery. "Excellent. Of course, I will have to tell Mother that you and Marra have broken it off."

Jeremy's face went ashen. "You wouldn't."

"I must," Worf said with mock gravity. "She has already picked a dress for the wedding. However, you may rest assured that I will insist that she respect your wishes that the details remain a secret."

Jeremy put his head in his hands. "Right. That'll work. Suuuuure.

Maybe I won't come to dinner."

"After you already accepted the invitation? I do not believe that Mother will forgive such a slight so easily."

Almost pleading now, Jeremy asked, "Can't you make up some excuse?"

Worf drew himself up to his full height. "A warrior does not lie."

Shaking his head, Jeremy laughed. "I suppose I'm doomed no matter what, huh?"

"A warrior also knows when to bow to the inevitable."

"And nothing's more inevitable than your mother. All right, fine, I'll tell you all everything over dinner. And to think--you were worried about whether you'll make a good diplomat." Worf said nothing as he handed the transporter operator a chip with the coordinates of the Rozhenkos' house.

He did, however, smile.

Emperor me'Gnnat XIX lay on his cushion and waited for death.

Death, however, didn't seem particularly interested in showing up anytime soon.

He had been born named te'Osbron on the planet that was now called tad.

However, when the previous Klingon governor appointed him to the position of emperor, he-like the eighteen emperors before him--took on the name me'Grmat. That was how things were done, even when the world was called al'Hmat and no one had ever heard of Klingons. And it was how things were still done now that the world had been conquered, renamed, and made a part of the Klingon Empire.

Te'Osbron had lived a long but quiet life as an acolyte, serving the spiritual and medical needs of the people of the he'Vant Mountains. The people liked him, and the Klingon overseers liked him. He was pleasant without being annoying, and he wasn't afraid to stand up to the Klingons when the situation called for it The Klingons admired both qualities, and so when me'Grmat XVin had died after a long illness, te'Osbron was the one the Klingons thought should serve as the new spiritual leader of their people.

Once, the title of emperor had carried more weight than that, of course. Once, the emperor ruled over all of al'Hmat. The word of me'Grmat was law.

Whether or not people followed that law was another question entirely, but me'Grmat preferred to think of the days of al'Hmat as a time of peace and joy and prosperity, not as a time of barbarous wars and internecine conflict that left the al'Hmatti easy pickings for the Klingon conquerors two centuries ago.

One of me'Grmat's servants--the emperor found he could not remember the young woman's name--entered, bringing in an antigrav tray containing his morning meal. She set it next to his cushion and said, "May I get Your Eminence anything else?"

"No, that will be all," me'Grmat said wearily. He didn't remember ever seeing this woman before, he realized. That's probably why I don't know her name.

The breakfast was standard assortments of fish, a raktajino, and pi pius claw--the latter being the one Klingon food me'Grmat could stomach. Indeed, he'd grown rather fond of it over the years. That, and Klingon coffee, of course, to which he'd become addicted.

He took a sip of the raktajino after the servant dashed out on all fours, then quickly spit it back onto the tray. There was something inside the drink, something solid.

Sitting on the tray amidst the regurgitated raktajino was a small, seamed plastic ball. With a heavy sigh, me'Grmat picked it up and pried it apart at the seams with his claws. To his total lack of surprise, it contained an optical chip.

The emperor's first instinct was to throw it away unread. It was almost assuredly another message from re'Trenat or one of his other rebel

idiots, imploring him to support their cause and to stop being a "mouthpiece for the Klingon fools." But, me'Grmat thought, re'Trenat went to all the trouble of smuggling it in here. The least I can do is hear what he has to say.

He reached over to the nightstand with his right hind leg and grabbed his reader. The optical chip presently inside it was some paperwork or other that me'Grmat had been putting off doing, so removing it was no onerous task. He put the new chip in with his left hind leg while nibbling on his fish with his forelegs.

As expected, re'Trenat's face appeared on the screen. Like most of his silly rebels, he had shaved the fur on one side of his head in the pattern of the glyph for victory. Re'Trenat's fur was snow-white, so the victory glyph stood out, etched as it was in his obsidian skin. He also, me'Grmat noticed, had taken to wearing some kind of jewelry in his left ear.

"Good morning, Your Eminence. I hope this message finds you well. I am told that a Federation ambassador is arriving within a day or so. It only took four years-though I suspect that attacking Governor Tirol's satellite is what really got their attention. But for whatever reason, the Federation has finally decided to heed our cries for help. Now is your chance, Your Eminence. The next time the governor tells you to speak before the people to denounce us, refuse! Or better yet, tell the people that they should support us! You wield great power among our people--your support would send a message to the Klingons that we are truly sick of their--"

Me'Grmat shut the reader off with a derisive snort.

Send a message to the Klingons, of course, he thought. That message being, "Time to kill this old fool and appoint a new emperor."

Emperor me'Grmat XIX had lived a long, prosperous, happy life. He did not want it to end at the wrong end of a disrupter. Besides, what better way to rebel against the Klingons than to die quietly in one's bed? It would make any self-respecting Klingon sick to his stomachs.

That is a philosophical rebellion, of course, me'Grmat thought with a sigh, so someone who leads attacks on mines and satellites probably wouldn't understand it.

He was about to reach over and signal for the servant, when she loped back in. "Your Eminence, Governor Tiral wishes to speak with you."

"Very well. Please take this raktajino away--it is defective. Have it destroyed in case some other, less understanding person drinks it."

"Are you sure, Your Eminence? The galley told me it was an especially fine batch this morning. I think if you drink some more, you'll find it to be quite a strong brew."

Me'Grmat started to say something, then sighed. "I'm too old for these word games. Take it away, and tomorrow, I expect all my food to be free of optical chips, is that understood?"

"Of course, Your Eminence. I'm sorry the raktajino wasn't to your liking."

Sighing, me'Grmat handed her the mug. If she insists on being oblique, let her, he thought. Klingons were big on surveillance in any case, so she probably needed to be discreet.

As soon as she left with the raktajino mug, me'Grmat rose from the cushion and sauntered toward his small computer console on all fours.

"Screen on."

Tiral's round face appeared on the screen. Behind him, me'Grmat could see the assorted consoles that made up Tiral's command center on that satellite of his. Some Klingons wandered about, but most of

the people me'Grmat saw were al'Hmatti, being ordered around by those selfsame Klingons. Sweat plastered the fur of the al'Hmatti to their skin, a combination of the hard work and the obscenely high temperatures that the Klingons insisted upon. Me'Grmat could not understand how any living being could tolerate such heat for any length of time.

"Greetings, me'Grmat,"

"Tiral said. None of the Klingons ever called him Your Eminence. As a rule, Klingons, in the course of general conversation at least, did not lie--part of that code of honor they were so proud of-and no Klingon considered the emperor to be an eminent personage.

"Greetings, Governor. To what do I owe this honor?"

"I need you to give a speech to the people this afternoon, me'Grmat.

Today is the anniversary of our retaking this planet, and I think the people need to be reminded of that."

"Of course, Governor. I'll be happy to."

That was a lie, of course. But then, me'Grmat hadn't really been happy to do much of anything in years.

Tiral signed off, and several servants came in. They bathed me'Grmat, dried his fur, combed it, placed the necklaces of his office over his head, and fitted him with the imperial tunic. The primary necklace was a string of silver with a Spican flame gem at its center, of the two other necklaces, one was of rubies, the other of kevas. When he had first ascended to the position of emperor, me'Grmat loved the idea of the necklaces, glowing as they did with the light of his office. That was before he'd realized that he had to remain on his hind legs at all times when he wore them.

The first Emperor me'Grmat had been female, as were her first five successors. It wasn't until after the Klingons came that any emperors were male. Unfortunately, male al'Hmatti, unlike females, had wider necks than heads, so unless they stood straight up, the necklaces would fall off.

These days, me'Grmat viewed them as little more than shining dead weight in any case.

He looked at himself in the mirror. When did I get old? he wondered.

He could not recall when, exactly, the bones in his face started to become so pronounced, nor when his cheeks and forehead got so sunken in, nor when everyone around him suddenly seemed larger, as if he'd shrunk.

Hissing softly, me'Grmat frightened the servants as they finished grooming him. You got old the some way everyone gets old, fool. Time passed.

After he was pronounced fit for public consumption, another servant led him to the communications center, where he would tell the al'Hmatti what Tiral wanted them to hear.

When it was over, me'Grmat found he could not remember precisely what it was he had said. It was probably the same speech he'd given a thousand times before, about how much more prosperous tad had been over the last two hundred years, about what a savage, barbaric people the al'Hmatti were before the Klingons brought them civilization, that sort of thing. The people in the comm center all went on about how inspirational it was, but me'Grmat wondered at their sincerity. He was the emperor, after all--they would hardly tell him his speech was awful. It meant nothing either way. If there were any al'Hmatti who agreed with what he said, they already agreed, and the speech did not matter. As for those al'Hmatti who did not agree--a number that me'Grmat was fairly sure included the majority of the people--one speech would hardly make a difference.

But he was the emperor. This was what he did. And he would continue to do it until he could draw breath no more.

After he returned to his chambers, Tiral contacted him, praising him, using words like inspirational and forceful. So the speech must have been a good one.

The servants removed the necklaces and the tunic and left. Then me'Grmat lay down on his cushion, and waited for death.

"Are you familiar with the world designated tad, Ambassador?"

Worf had to resist the urge to turn around and see which ambassador had entered the room. This new title will obviously take some getting used to, he thought.

He sat in the large, undecorated office belonging to T'Latrek of Vulcan, one of the Federation Council's ministers for external affairs, and the person to whom Worf reported. She had gone over a variety of administrative trivia with Worf, including several items that had been, for whatever reason, left incomplete by his predecessor. T'Latrek also made the Federation Council's policies on a variety of subjects clear to Worf.

Now, she had turned to the final order of business his first assignment.

In answer to her question, Worf said, "I believe it is a world the empire conquered several centuries ago."

"Two hundred and fourteen years ago, to be precise," T'Latrek said.

"The world is quite inhospitable to Klingons, but is rich in top aline deposits. The natives, the al'Hmatti, were given jeghpu'wl' status, as is

traditional in the Klingon Empire." T'Latrek pronounced the Klingon word, which roughly translated to conquered people--not quite slaves, but not full citizens of the empire, either--with a mild-but-acceptable accent. "They had lived as such for two hundred and ten years."

Worf frowned. He had not known of any change in tad's status--but then, he hadn't followed the developments of every conquered world in the empire. "What happened four years ago?"

"The Klingons invaded Cardassia, and that near depletion of Klingon Defense Force vessels within the empire proper allowed a rebel faction among the al'Hmatti to succeed in a coup d'etat. They immediately applied to the Federation for assistance, as well as possible membership. Since the empire had withdrawn from the Khitomer Accords at that point, the Federation was willing to investigate the matter." T'Latrek handed Worf a padd, then continued. "A preliminary investigation was begun by your predecessor. However, that investigation was cut short when the empire retook the world and also re-allied with the Federation following Cardassia becoming part of the Dominion. Hostilities with the Dominion precluded any further pursuit of the investigation, in any event."

Worf glanced at the padd's display. As the planet's name indicated--the word literally meant frozen--tad was an icy world. Worf could understand the value of the planet two centuries earlier, when the empire had been in expansionist mode. Topaline was used in atmospheric domes, and for a long time was considered quite rare. Within the last fifty years, though, dozens of worlds had been discovered that were rich in the mineral. Worf wondered why the empire bothered reconquering tad. He set the padd atop a pile of other material that T'Latrek had provided. I will, I suspect, learn the answers to my questions soon enough, he thought.

"I take it," he said aloud, "that the end of the war has changed that."

"Yes. Technically, the request the al'Hmatti made is legitimate, and the Federation has an obligation to pursue it That must be balanced against the needs of the Federation's alliance with the empire, particularly in this time of rebuilding."

"The Federation cannot accept a planet that is under Klingon rule as a member," Worf said bluntly.

"On the face of it, yes, that is so," T'Latrek said. "But the retaking of tad has not solved the empire's problem, either. The rebels continue to flourish. Last week, they attacked Governor Tiral's satellite base. The Federation Council has received repeated calls for help from the al'Hmatti, and Tiral has requested assistance from the Klingon High Council. The Federation cannot simply ignore the al'Hmatti's request. Therefore, a solution needs to be found that will satisfy the Federation, the al'Hmatti, and the Klingons. That is your assignment."

Worf nodded. "Very well."

"One more thing, Ambassador." T'Latrek folded her hands together and gazed right at Worf. "I am, of course, aware that the head of your House is also the leader of the Klingon High Council. It is quite possible that the relationship will prove useful to you in performing your duties. But it is just as possible that the relationship will cause a conflict of interest. Your record in this regard has led some members of the Federation Council to question your appointment. You have demonstrated a pattern of allowing your loyalty to family to overcome your duty. Those, in fact, represent the only black marks on an otherwise spotless Starfleet record. Should such a conflict happen now, we expect you to resolve it logically and in a way that will not endanger your continued service as a Federation ambassador."

"Is that a threat, Minister?" Worf asked.

T'Latrek raised an eyebrow. "An observation, Ambassador."

Worf remembered how his departing the Enterprise without leave in order to claim his vengeance against Duras for K'Ehleyr's death had warranted a reprimand from Captain Picard--his first since graduating from the Academy. He had resigned from Starfleet in order to aid Gowron in his efforts against Duras's sisters and repay his debt to

Gowron for restoring his House's honor, a move that had probably delayed his promotion to lieutenant commander. And Captain Sisko had reprimanded him after he chose to rescue his wife Jadzia Dax rather than complete a critical retrieval mission.

Slowly, Worf said, "While it is true that Chancellor Martok took me into his House, my first duty is to the Federation."

"I do not doubt that, Ambassador, and there is no need for you to reassure me. Your actions will, I'm sure, do so quite satisfactorily."

Worf nodded to T'Latrek. "Of course." Vulcans, as a rule, did not lie. If T'Latrek had been one of those who objected to Worf's appointment, she would have said so.

"You will be escorted to the Klingon border by the Enterprise tomorrow morning at 0800." T'Latrek looked down at her desk and spoke in a quieter tone "In fact, Captain Picard personally requested the assignment."

Is that a note of disapproval? Worf wondered. There was something in TLatrek's voice that he had not heard before. Until now, T'Latrek had spoken with typical Vulcan stoicism, betraying no emotions whatsoever.

But then, he supposed that a Vulcan would find so sentimental a gesture distasteful.

Worf, however, was grateful. Contact with his former comrades on the Enterprise had been sporadic during the war. It would be good to see them all.

Then he thought back over what T'Latrek had actually said. "To the border?" he asked.

"Yes. The empire insists that you be taken through Klingon space by a Defense Force vessel, the Gorkon, which will rendezvous with the Enterprise at the border. Apparently its commander, Captain Klag, has taken a personal interest in tad and insisted that he be your escort.

Indeed, Klag did not want Federation involvement at all, but the High Council was willing, as long as you were the Federation representative."

suspect Martok's hand in that, Worf thought. Klag, Worf remembered, was the officer who had wiped out an entire Jem'Hadar regiment on Marcan V. T'Latrek continued, "You will be joined on the Enterprise by your personal aide. The rest of your staff is already in place at the embassy on Qo'nos. Their records are available for your review, of course." She indicated the pile of pad ds that sat on the desk in front of Worf.

"Very well," Worf said with a nod as he rose from T'Latrek's guest chair, gathering those selfsame padds

"If there is nothing else ... "

"No." T'Latrek also stood, raising her right hand and parting the middle two fingers in the V-shape of the Vulcan salute. "Peace and long life, Ambassador. Qapla'."

"Qapla'." Worf raised his own right hand and matched the gesture. It was uncomfortable, but the minister had done him the courtesy of a Klingon salutation. Worf could hardly do other than return the favor.

"Live long and prosper, Minister." At least T'Latrek isn't human, Worf thought as he left the office. Then she would likely have insisted on shaking hands. No matter how long he lived among humans, Worf had never been able to think of that human ritual as anything other than silly-looking.

Worf headed for the nearest transporter room in order to return to his parents' home for what would probably be the last time for many months.

In all his time as security chief on the Galaxy-class ship that bore the name Enterprise, Worf had escorted many people to the V. I P quarters. They were the largest on the ship, almost embarrassing in then luxury. Worf-who had found his own, smaller rooms to be unnecessarily lavish--had never thought he would be in a position to stay in such quarters.

Now, on the Sovereign-class successor to that ship, Worf found himself in accommodations even larger than those he had so disdained. Commander Riker himself had met Worf in the transporter room and escorted him here, and Worf came very close to requesting something smaller--but he knew that would not happen. He was, after all, a Federation ambassador.

So he simply set down the duffel bags he had insisted on carrying himself (courtesy was one thing, but a warrior never let others carry his personal items), turned to Riker, and said, "Thank you, Commander."

"The pleasure is mine, Mr. Ambassador," Riker said formally.

"Please, Commander--I believe it would not be a breach of protocol for you to call me by name."

Grinning with his still-beardless face--Worf wished the first officer would grow it back; without it, his face looked just wrong somehow--Riker said, "Haven't gotten used to the title yet, huh?"

"No," Worf said simply. "But even if I had, such formality between us would be--unnecessary."

"All right, but that means you're going to have to start calling me

"Will.""

Worf blinked. He hadn't thought of that Riker had been his superior officer for so long ..."I will work on that--Will."

"Good," Riker said.

Walking toward the food replicator, Worf asked the question he knew he'd need to know the answer to sooner or later "How is Deanna?"

"Fine," Riker said with an ease that relieved Worf. "Not here, unfortunately--she's on Betazed, helping with the reconstruction efforts there." To the computer, Worf said, "Prune juice, chilled." He turned to Riker. "Anything for you, si-Will?"

"No, thank you."

The prune juice materialized in the dispenser, and Worf took a sip of it. "And you and Deanna are ... ?" Worf let the question trail off.

Riker broke into another of his trademark grins. "Doing just fine, thanks."

"I am glad to hear it." Worf's brief relationship with Deanna had been a source of tension, which was why, when Riker and Deanna had renewed their relationship on the Bak'u planet, Worf had made sure to give it his blessing.

"Y'know, Worf," Riker said, approaching the Klingon, "the first time I saw you, I said to myself, "That man is going to make a great diplomat.""

"Really?"

"No, not really. Worf, the first time I saw you, you tried to blow a hole in the viewscreen because Q's face appeared on it."

Worf took another sip of his prune juice. "I was young and rash."

"And what would you call yourself now?"

Worf considered. "Old and rash."

Riker laughed. "It is good to see you again, Worf. Well, I'll let you get settled in." He headed toward the doors. As they parted, Riker turned and said, "Oh, there's a reception for you in Ten-Forward tonight at 1800 hours."

Wincing, Worf said, "Comma--Will, I do not think--"

Cutting him off, Riker said, "Worf, in the seven-and-a half years you served on the Enterprise, how many people of your current rank did we take on as passengers?"

"I do not recall the exact number, but--"

"And how many of them had some kind of reception or event planned in then- honor?" Worf sighed. "All of them."

"Precisely. Don't worry. It'll be a modest affair--just a few officers and some finger food and drinks."

"Modest," Worf said, sounding dubious.

Putting his hand to his heart, Riker said, "Mr. Worf, don't you trust my word?"

Remembering more than one surprise party that the commander had been responsible for springing on various unsuspecting crew members, Worf could only reply "No, I do not." Chuckling, Riker said, "Well, let me put it another way Captain Picard would be deeply offended if you didn't show up. See you at 1800. Oh, and you're welcome to join us in my quarters afterward." Worf frowned.

"Poker night," Riker said with a smile, and then departed.

Shaking his head, Worf turned to his duffels and began to unpack. The trip to the border would take several days, after all. He placed his clothing in drawers and the pad ds he'd need on the desk.

Then he unpacked the two framed pictures. One was of him and Alexander. It was several years old--Alexander was much shorter and Worf was still a Starfleet lieutenant when the picture was taken--but Worf had kept it with him since the previous Enterprise had been destroyed.

The other was his and Jadzia's wedding picture.

He stared at it for several seconds before finally placing it on the bed stand next to the other picture.

Losing K'Ehleyr had been painful, but he had at least been able to avenge her death. Ending his relationship with Deanna had been difficult, but ultimately the right choice for them both.

Jadzia Dax's death was agony, made worse by the fact that Worf had not been able to avenge it.

It had been over a year, and the pain had not faded.

He wondered if it ever would.

Finally, he unpacked his other possessions the statue of Kahless fighting Morath; his bat'leth championship trophy; the metal baldric he had worn over his uniform since becoming Enterprise security chief; the new mek'leth Ezri Dax had given him as a going-away present after his old one had been taken by the Breen during their capture; and his family's bat'leth, the one possession of the House of Mogh that had survived the Khitomer massacre.

As he set the bat'leth on the wall--replacing a rather hideous painting--the door chime rang. "Enter," he said.

A human wearing civilian clothing--a dark blue tunic, a burgundy vest, and black trousers and shoes--entered. He carried a padd in his left hand. "Mr. Ambassador, I'm sorry I'm late," he said calmly. The man spoke with an accent Worf couldn't quite place. "My name is Giancarlo Wu. I'm your aide."

Worf noted that Wu did not offer his hand. A promising start.

According to his file, Wu had served as Worf's predecessor's aide as well, and had been on the staff of the Federation embassy on Qo'nos prior to that, so he was certainly aware of Klingon customs and preferences. "Minister T'Latrek told me you would be joining me here."

"Yes," Wu said. "I do apologize again. I'm afraid I was caught u p in getting your computer access set up, and I was unable to greet you at the transporter."

"That is not a problem. I do know my way around this ship." Wu smiled a small smile. "Yes, of course. In any case," he continued, glancing down at the padd and tapping the occasional command into it, "you have quite a large number of correspondences waiting for you. I will go through them and flag any that need your personal attention, but most of them are trivial matters that either I can handle or can wait until after the tad matter is resolved." Something on the padd

seemed to grab his attention, and he added, "Ah, you also have a good number of personal correspondences, which I forwarded to you unread, obviously."

"Good," Worf said. "Since you are not new to this position, I assume I do not need to tell you that Klingons do not prevaricate. I expect you to speak the truth to me at all times. It is possible that my predecessor had an understandably human need to have her feelings assuaged on certain delicate matters. However, I prefer that you assume there are no such things."

"With all due respect, Mr. Ambassador, there are always delicate matters."

Worf nodded, conceding the point. "If you do stumble across one of them, I will let you know."

Wu nodded. "Understood, Mr. Ambassador." He gazed back down at his padd. "In addition to your personal correspondences, I have also forwarded to you an up-to-date report on tad, more current than what Minister T'Latrek gave you yesterday. I have also obtained the complete personnel records of the Gorkon crew and of Governor Tiral's staff on tad."

"Good," Worf said again, and he meant it. He had not expected such thoroughness, though he was glad of it

"Will there be anything else?" Wu asked.

"Not at the moment. I will contact you if that changes. Otherwise, I assume I will see you at the reception at 1800 hours in Ten-Forward."

Wu blinked. "That is in your honor, Mr. Ambassador. I wouldn't presume--"

"You serve me," Worf said. "A reception in my honor is therefore also a reception in yours by extension." Again smiling a small smile, Wu said, "Thank you, sir." He hesitated, then, apparently taking Worf's urging not to prevaricate to heart, said, "Your predecessor never liked having staff attend such functions. She said that having us around reminded her too much of work."

"A very human attitude."

"The ambassador was very human." Wu put the padd in the pocket of his vest and said, "My quarters are just next door, sir. I am at your disposal any time of the day or night."

"Thank you," Worf said. He moved toward the desk as Wu headed toward the exit.

"Mr. Ambassador?" Wu said, turning to speak over his shoulder.

Worf turned to face him. "Yes?"

"I know we're only going to be on the ship for a few days, but-Well, I think the statue would look better over there." Wu pointed at the bureau over which Worf had hung the hot'leth.

"I will consider it," Worf said dryly.

"Very good, sir."

And with that, he left.

A curious person, Worf thought. Still, Wu had lived on Qo'nos and worked with Klingons, so he probably wouldn't have too much trouble dealing with the conditions on the Gorkon. Starfleet ships were designed for comfort; Defense Force vessels were meant solely for

combat Often humans had difficulty dealing with the somewhat Spartan conditions--indeed, his comrades on Deep Space Nine had complained about it endlessly whenever events of the Dominion War necessitated travel on a Klingon ship.

Wu was also right the statue did look better on the bureau.

Sitting at the desk, Worf said, "Computer, display personal correspondences, Ambassador Worf." He then gave his access code.

Wu had not exaggerated. He had dozens of letters. Most seemed to be of a simple, congratulatory nature, but he decided to plow through them and get it over with.

There was a note from Ezri, catching nun up on what was going on on Deep Space Nine, including the rather surprising news of who had replaced Odo as the security chief on the Promenade. His parents, typically, had sent a message, even though he had seen them less than four hours ago. They ended it with Father saying "Son, we could not be more proud of you. And remember, that we will always be here for you, no matter what." Mother added "We love you, Worf."

Worf saved both messages, then continued through the other letters.

Some were from former Enterprise personnel who had moved on to other assignments, including a number of his former security staff. Some were from Klingons he had served with during the war. Some were from the Rozhenkos' friends and family. A few others were from Deep Space Nine.

He noticed that two messages came from the U. S S. Excalibur. That was, he recalled, Captain Mackenzie Calhoun's ship, presently assigned to what used to be Thai Ionian space. Worf remembered that Commander Shelby was Calhoun's first officer, and three of his Academy classmates also served on mat vessel.

The freckled face of one of those classmates, Lieutenant Mark Mchenry, appeared on the screen. "Hey, Worf. Soleta's busy with a sensor re calibration so I offered to send this message, since we just heard from Commander Shelby--who sends her regards, by the way, she said you guys served together on the Enterprise during that Borg mess--about your being made ambassador, and we were all thrilled, especially with all the reports that you got captured by the Dominion, we figured you were a goner, so it's good to know that you not only survived, but got a nice job. Kinda funny, you being a diplomat, especially after all the times you and Kebron ..."

The message went on for several more minutes-though it seemed like hours--delivered in Mchenry's usual stream-of-consciousness babble, recalling several incidents from their shared Academy days. Worf swore it was all one sentence.

Then the Vulcanoid features of Lieutenant Soleta replaced Mchenry's image, which came to Worf as something of a relief. "Mchenry forgot to actually say congratulations. I should have known better than to trust him with composing the message. So, congratulations, Worf. And best of luck to you--though I suspect you will not need it."

The second Excalibur message had no audiovisual component, merely a one-word text message from the ship's chief of security, and Worf's former roommate, Zak Kebron congratulations.

For Kebron, it was verbose.

Worf leaned back and looked at the pictures of Jadzia and Alexander, thought about seeing his parents and Jeremy, being reunited today with the Enterprise crew, and now all these letters. It seems the past does not wish to leave me alone these last few days.

Leaning forward again, Worf began to compose a reply to Soleta.

As Worf and Wu approached Ten-Forward at 1805 hours, Worf could hear the sounds of a trombone playing.

Human music, he thought with a sigh. should have known.

With a due sense of anticipation and dread, he entered Ten-Forward, his aide right behind him. A cacophony of Dixieland jazz assaulted his ears as the doors parted. The room was nearly packed with uniformed personnel, eating and drinking. Most of them, of course, Worf did not recognize. Though some of the staff from the Enterprise- D presently served on this newer ship, they were by far in the minority. Many, like Worf, had gone on to other assignments; many had been killed in the war. The result was a party in Worf's honor full of people he did not know.

In the center of the room, a band provided the music-with William Riker playing the trombone. A sign had been placed over the windows that said welcome ambassador Worf in English and Klingon.

"Modest, indeed," Worf muttered.

"Sir?" Wu asked.

Sighing, Worf said to his aide, "Commander Riker had promised me that this would be a modest affair. His exact words were, "Just a few officers and some finger food and drinks.""

Wu looked around the crowded room. "Obviously, sir, this is a definition of the word modest that I was heretofore unaware of," he said dryly.

Steeling himself against the noise, Worf milled around the party. He lost track of Wu relatively quickly, but he did find Geordi La Forge and Data. Geordi still had his goatee, for which Worf was grateful. It almost made up for Riker's clean-shaven face. As for Data, the android had a broad grin on his face as he asked how Worf was. Worf hadn't served much with Data since the android had installed his emotion chip, and the idea of Data smiling was still difficult for Worf to wrap

his mind around.

Worf's nose identified the food long before he could actually see it.

Though some of the scents were unfamiliar, he could definitely pick out some Klingon food. He excused himself from the chief engineer and second officer and made a beeline for the source three tables near the window. Two of them had a standard collection of Federation appetizers, mostly Earth food, with bits and pieces from other worlds tossed in for good measure. This, Worf thought, explains the less familiar odors.

But the third table had all Klingon delicacies pi pius claw, bregit lung, glad st krada legs, zilm'kach, skull stew (that had been chopped to pieces for some odd reason; the skull should have remained intact), stewed bok-rat liver, and bowls of both gagh and racht (dead, but Worf supposed one couldn't have everything).

The food on the third table was also mostly untouched. Worf grabbed a plate and started piling food onto it. In deference to Federation custom, he used utensils to serve himself rather than his hands.

Worf took a bite of zilm'kach. It tasted replicated, sadly, but not bad for all that. He had been spoiled, being on Deep Space Nine with its Klingon restaurant, not to mention having spent the last several days eating his mother's home cooking.

Realizing he'd need something to wash this down, he approached the bar, fielding several more greetings and congratulations as he went. A bartender saw Worf's approach and leaned forward. "Can I interest the ambassador in a glass of prune juice? Perhaps something stronger?"

"Something stronger," Worf said. Prune juice may be a warrior's drink, but this is a party. "A chech'tluth, please."

"Coming up," the bartender said with a smile and walked off, leaving

Worf to finish his food and try not to get a headache from the music.

The chech'tluth will help in the latter regard, at least, he thought.

Beverly Crusher walked up to Worf while he waited for his drink and ate some racht. "Hello, Worf."

"Doctor," Worf said, inclining his head. "Nice party," he deadpanned.

Crusher laughed. "Y'know, I had the feeling you weren't going to be thrilled with this to-do. But Will insisted you'd love it."

"I believe, in Commander Riker's lexicon, that truly means that he would love it."

Again, Crusher laughed. "That's certainly true."

The bartender came back with Worf's drink, which had been sufficiently heated, to Worf's relief. He put the plate down on the bar and grabbed the mug. He took a gulp and felt the hot liquid burn pleasantly in his mouth. A warm feeling started at the base of his throat and started to spread to his chest and head. Even better, it wasn't a syntheholic drink. While humans--who had spent millennia cooking all the flavor out of their food-did not have sufficiently discerning taste buds to distinguish alcohol from synthehol, Klingons could. While Worf would drink synthehol if he had to--while on duty, for example--he greatly preferred the real thing, and this was definitely it. A few more sips, he thought, and I might even be able to stand this music.

Next to him, Crusher's face grew serious. "Worf, I--I just wanted to let you know that--if you ever want to talk about--well ..."

"About what?" Worf finally asked when Crusher's hesitant pause threatened to go on forever.

"Jadzia. With someone who's been there."

And then Worf understood. "Odan," he said.

The doctor nodded.

Like Worf, Crusher had fallen in love with a joined Trill. Like Worf, Crusher had to watch the host body die, and then have the symbiont live on in another that she could not love.

"Doctor--Beverly--"

Crusher let out a bark of laughter. At Worf's surprised look, she said, "Sorry, it's just that Odan called me

"Dr. Beverly.""

"Ah. In any event, I appreciate the offer."

"But you won't take me up on it."

In fact, Worf had no intention of taking her up on it, but he had hoped he had not been that obvious about it. "Doctor--"

"Will's not the only one who's easy to read by someone who knows him well enough," Crusher said. "It's okay. I honestly didn't think you would want to talk with me. But I wanted you to know that the offer was on the table, in case you change your mind."

Worf nodded. "Thank you, Doctor--truly, I am grateful. However, I have had over a year to come to terms with Jadzia's death."

"Sometimes that's not enough. Believe me."

The music came to a merciful halt, and then a voice rang out through Ten-Forward. "Everyone, may I have your attention, please?"

Worf turned toward the center of the room to see Captain Picard holding a glass of some kind of ale.

The room quieted down almost instantaneously. Jeanluc Picard had that effect on people.

"Many of you here do not know Ambassador Worf personally, though surely you know him by reputation. He served aboard the previous Enterprise with distinction, then did likewise at Deep Space Nine, one of the most important strategic posts in the quadrant. Long ago, I said that the bridge wouldn't be the same without him, and the last four years have proven that to be the case. But I also know that he has served both the Federation-which sometimes saw him as a curiosity and in which he was always to some degree an outsider--and the Klingon Empire--which twice saw fit to exile him from his own homeland--with honor. And now, those two august bodies have shown tremendous good sense in allowing him to serve them both as the Federation's ambassador to Qo'nos. As one who has been his commanding officer, his cha'DIch, and his friend, I wish him well--but I do not wish him luck. For a warrior does not depend on luck, and Worf, son of Mogh, is first and foremost a warrior."

Heard held his ale up. "So I ask you all to raise your glasses and join me in saluting the bravest man I have ever known. To Worf!"

A roomful of Starfleet officers, most of whom Worf had never met before tonight, raised their glasses and cried out, "To Worf!"

As they all drank, Worf held up his own glass. Perhaps this party won't be so bad, after all ...

Chapter Two.

Klag had to admit to being impressed with the sight on his viewscreen.

The Gorkon had been joined at the rendezvous point by the Sword of Kahless, Chancellor Martok's new flagship, replacing the Negh'Var.

Martok had informed Klag that he wished to brief the captain and the ambassador on the tad mission when the Enterprise arrived.

Klag had been less than thrilled with the High Council's reply to his request for aid to Governor Tiral. To put the negotiations in the hands of a Federation ambassador who only got his position because he was a member of Martok's own House angered Klag.

Toq's voice sounded from behind him. "Captain, a Starfleet vessel is coming out of warp. Sensors identify it as the Enterprise. They are hailing us."

Klag nodded. "On screen."

The bridge of Starfleet 's flagship replaced the exterior of the empire's on the viewscreen. Although most would have been honored to converse with Jean-Luc Picard, who nine years ago was the first outsider ever to serve as a Klingon chancellor's Arbiter of Succession, Klag was much more interested in greeting the human who sat to Picard's right

Picard stood. "Captain Klag, greetings from the Federation. Ambassador Worf and his aide are ready to beam over at your

convenience. Unless the presence of the Sword of Kahless indicates a change in the mission?"

"Thank you, Captain Picard. There is no change to the mission, and the ambassador's aide can beam over at any time. However, Chancellor Martok wishes to brief the ambassador and me. Please transport him to the Sword of Kahless. I will meet him there in ten minutes."

"Of course."

Business concluded, Klag turned to look at Picard's first officer. "It is good to see you again, Riker."

Riker grinned with a face that was now inexplicably beardless. "Same here, Klag. It'd be good to have a chance to catch up. If nothing else, I'd love to hear about what happened to your arm."

"That, my old friend, is a long story. Luckily, I have a case of blood wine that will go quite well with long stories. With your captain's permission, I will contact you when my business with the chancellor is concluded, and we can speak of old times."

Picard nodded. "My permission is granted, Captain. In addition, my chief medical officer tells me she has an old comrade serving on your vessel"

This news did not surprise Klag. B'Oraq, the Gorkon's doctor, had studied medicine in the Federation. "She, too, may beam aboard at her leisure, Captain."

"Thank you, Captain. Enterprise out."

Klag rose from the captain's chair. "Commander Drex, you are in command until I return from the Sword ofkah less."

"Yes, sir," Drex muttered.

"Is there a problem, Commander?" Drex straightened. "None, sir," he said with more authority.

"Good. See that that state of affairs continues."

With that Klag left the bridge, followed by his own personal guard. The pair of them proceeded to the transporter room in silence.

Klag arrived in the Sword of Kahless's much larger transporter room to see a Klingon as tall as Klag himself, wearing a brown tunic with silver trim under a gray vest decorated on either lapel with the Federation and Klingon Empire insignias.

"I am Klag, captain of the Gorkon," he said as he stepped down from the platform. "On behalf of the Defense Force and the High Council, I welcome you, Ambassador Worf."

Worf nodded. "Thank you, Captain. It will be an honor to be transported by one of the finest new vessels in the fleet"

A bekk--the Defense Force equivalent of a noncommissioned security guard--stood in the doorway and said, "The chancellor awaits you both," then led the way out of the transporter room.

The bekk took them through several corridors, bringing them further into the interior of the massive vessel. A guard was stationed at the door, and Klag's guard joined him as the captain and Worf entered.

Only two others had served as head of the High Council in Klag's lifetime, and Klag had met them both. K'mpec had once traveled on the Baruk, on which Klag served as an ensign. He had seemed larger

than life to Klag, a near-mythic figure who, at that time, had already served as chancellor longer than anyone in history. K'mpec carried himself as if he had been born to lead the empire, and the old warrior's death had saddened Klag. Many years later, Klag had met Gowron, who had struck him as little more than a political opportunist who had schemed his way to the top. He had seemed born only to best serve himself rather than the empire.

Although Klag had, of course, served under Mar tok--every member of the Defense Force did during his tenure as Gowron's chief of staff--he'd never met him until now. The man who got up from a chair far more ornate than any on which Klag had ever sat seemed to rank between the two extremes of his predecessors. He had none of K'mpec's grandeur, nor Gowron's self importance--simply the face of a warrior, proudly bearing the scars of die Jem'Hadar blade that had cost him his left eye. The smile with which he greeted them was genuine.

"Worf!" Martok said as he rose. "It is good to see you again, my friend, as always." He turned his one eye to Klag. "And the Hero of Marcan. It is an honor to have you aboard my flagship, Captain."

To Klag's surprise and delight, Martok actually sounded like he meant it

"The honor is mine, Chancellor. I simply won a battle. It was you who won the war."

"We all won the war," the chancellor said, "the empire, the Federation, and even the Romulans. We claimed victory through unity. And unity is what we must now discuss."

Martok indicated two other chairs--far smaller, of course--as he sat back down in his own.

Turning to Klag, Martok said, "First of all, Captain, I wish to make something clear. Worf will be in charge of the mission to tad. From this point until the mission concludes, command is his."

Klag leaned forward. This was not what he had in mind.

"Chancellor--"

"You still command the Gorkon, and obviously Worf has no authority in any matters outside the purview of the mission--but the mission is his.

Is that understood?"

Oh, I understand just fine, Klag thought bitterly. You use your influence unfairly, son of Mogh--as you did to obtain this position.

Another voice rang out in the back of Klag's head And what was it you used to ensure that the Gorkon escort the ambassador to tad in the first place?

Aloud, Klag said only, "Of course."

"Good." Martok turned back to Worf. "The situation on tad is difficult. All things being equal, I might consider allowing the al'Hmatti their independence."

Klag blinked in surprise.

"But all things are not equal," Martok continued. "Several conquered worlds have taken advantage of the war to foment their own rebellions.

None are as far along as tad's, nor may they be. If we grant tad freedom from our rule, it will be a sign of weakness, and encourage other worlds to wrestle for independence."

Interesting, Klag thought He had not known this bit of intelligence; he could hardly blame the High Council for keeping it quiet. He wondered what other worlds had attempted to throw off their overseers.

Martok leaned forward and looked at Worf. "Let me do you the honor of being blunt, Worf. Under no circumstances can I allow tad to be ruled by anyone other than Klingons. To do that would plunge the empire into a dozen conflicts at a time when we are attempting to rebuild a fleet. I will not be remembered as the chancellor who led the empire to victory over the Dominion only to lose a quarter of our territory tojeghpu "."

Worf nodded. "Thank you, Chancellor. It is my hope that a solution can be reached that will please all sides."

"The only side that concerns me is that which will keep the empire intact."

"Naturally. But I do not work for the empire. My first duty is to the Federation; my second to the alliance between the two governments. You may rest assured that I intend to serve both."

And no mention of his duty to the House of Martok, Klag noted. wonder if that is due to my presence.

Martok laughed. "You already sound like a diplomat, Worf. I'm sure that if anyone can find that solution, it will be you." He leaned back. "Excellent. I'm glad that's over with. Someday, my friend, I will find it in my heart to forgive you for turning me into a politician."

Said Worf, "I have had no reason to regret my actions, Chancellor."

"No, I suppose you haven't," Martok said with a snort. "Well, enough of

this. Captain, again, it is an honor to have met you finally. And we will meet again at Ty'Gokor in a few months' time."

Klag fought to control his reaction. So, I will be inducted into the Order of the Bat'leth after all. He couldn't help but direct a few smug thoughts in the direction of Kargan, in whichever afterlife was unfortunate enough to have him. "The chancellor honors me," Klag said, rising from his chair. "With your permission, we will return to the Gorkon."

"Not just yet. Oh, you're dismissed, Captain, and may return to your ship. But Worf and I have other matters to discuss. Family matters."

All the joy he felt at Martok's pronouncement fled Klag. was right.

This entire show was for my benefit. The true business will commence after I leave.

Not wishing to show his anger in front of Martok-who was, after all, still supreme commander of the empire's citizenry--Klag simply said, "As the chancellor commands."

With that, he left, his guard following close behind.

Klag decided that his first impression of Martok needed to be revised somewhat.

The first time William Riker ever set foot on a Klingon ship, he was ten years old. After years of pestering his father to take him along on one of the assignments that took Kyle Riker away from home for long periods of time, Dad finally acquiesced--on a mission that entailed passage with the Klingons.

From the moment Will first beamed into the dark, funny-smelling ship full of large, foreboding creatures who seemed to spend all their time

growling down at him, he was scared to death. He retreated to the tiny cabin assigned to him and Dad, sat on the metal slab that was supposed to be a bed, and hoped nobody would see him crying.

He never asked to go along with his father again. When he was older, and more cynical, Will figured that Dad chose the Klingon ship hoping for precisely that result.

Ten years later, as a cadet at Starfleet Academy, he went on a mission that required him to board a Klingon ship. It had taken all the fortitude his twenty-year-old self could muster not to cower in fear at the very idea.

Now, of course, he was over forty and beyond such things. He had spent plenty of time on Klingon ships and in Klingon space, ranging from a historic-if-brief tour as the first officer of the I. K S. Pagh (the first time a Starfleet officer formally served as a member of a Klingon Defense Force crew) to more recent visits during the Dominion War.

But as he materialized alongside Beverly Crusher and Giancarlo Wu in the Gorkon transporter room, he couldn't help but hear his ten-year-old self saying, "Dad, it's dark in here!"

Waiting for them was Klag, once Riker's second officer on the Pagh, now the captain of this ship. The two had formed a close friendship during Riker's tenure on the Pagh, and they had stayed in sporadic touch ever since. After Riker's departure, Klag had been made first officer, and had remained at that post for the decade following-an unusually long time for a Klingon to remain at one post.

Klag had changed over the years. For one thing, as Riker had noted before, he had lost his right arm. His straight, jet-black hair was now twice as long as the shoulder-length cut Riker remembered, and his goatee had grown in fuller. He still had the same eyebrows-up swept even by Klingon standards--sharp nose, and penetrating black eyes.

Next to Klag stood a taller, lankier Klingon with a scowl on his face;

this man had the insignia of a commander, so Riker figured he was the first officer.

"Welcome to the Gorkon, Commander Riker," Klag said. He still had the same deep, resonant voice that Riker remembered.

"Thank you. This is Dr. Beverly Crusher, and the ambassador's aide, Giancarlo Wu."

The commander made a noise, and then muttered something under his breath. Riker didn't catch all of it, but it sounded like something derogatory about humans.

In flawless Klingon, Wu said, "I have slept on plenty of metal slabs in my time, Commander. You needn't worry about my well-being."

Klag threw his head back and laughed the hearty laugh that had startled Riker out of ten years' growth when he first heard it in the Pagh's mess hall. "Well said, Wu." Klag then turned to Beverly and said, "B'Oraq has been looking forward to seeing you again, Doctor."

"Likewise," Beverly said with a nod.

Klag said, "Commander Drex will escort you to the medical ward, and the ambassador's aide to his quarters."

Without preamble, Drex moved to the exit without bothering to see if Wu and Beverly followed. In a human, that would have been considered rude, but it was normal for Klingons. If you don't have the brains to follow, you don't deserve to be escorted in the first place, Riker thought with a smile. He had to admit to admiring the blunt simplicity.

Once the door closed behind Beverly, Klag turned to Riker and slapped him on the arm. "It has been a long time, my friend. Come, let

us drink and remember old times."

"Lead on," Riker said, glad he had had the foresight to take an anti-inebriant before leaving the Enterprise. Bloodwine went right to his head.

For the first time in Beverly Crusher's medical career, she walked into a Klingon medical ward without wincing.

Well, not wincing too much, in any case ... The pitiful state of Klingon medicine had been a constant source of annoyance to Beverly, especially once she signed onto a ship with a Klingon officer whom she would be responsible for treating. Starfleet's smallest emergency medikit was better equipped than the best Klingon hospital.

But the Gorkon's medical ward seemed almost adequate. And Beverly suspected she knew the reason why.

"Hello, B'Oraq," she said to the woman presently sitting at a small desk, reading a computer screen.

The woman--short and compact by Klingon standards, which made her close to the average height for a human woman, and with dark green eyes--looked up, and bared her teeth. She cried, "ghojmohwi'," the Klingon word for teacher or mentor. "I had hoped to see you when I learned we were meeting with your ship."

And then, in an un-Klingon-like gesture, B'Oraq got up and gave Beverly a hug.

"It's good to see you, too, B'Oraq," Beverly said, returning the hug.

"I see you've made some progress."

"Actually, you can thank the war," B'Oraq said, pulling on her braid as she spoke, a nervous habit she hadn't lost in the past decade. Her auburn hair, which had been waist-length ten years earlier, barely reached her neck now. However, she retained the braid that extended down past her right shoulder, secured at the end with a small pin in the shape of the emblem of her House. "Not only was it a glorious victory for the empire--and the rest of the quadrant," she added quickly, "but it, more than anything, enabled me to finally make some of the advances I had been trying to put forward in Defense Force medicine."

Beverly, who had a hard time using the word glorious to apply to the drawn-out misery of the Dominion War, frowned and asked, "In what way?"

"Well, it's all well and good to insist that you can survive with an injury and that to have it treated is a sign of weakness. But when the Federation and Romulan soldiers fighting alongside you are fully recovered from more devastating injuries in less than a day, you start to learn the value of being able to knit bones in an instant and return whole warriors to the field of battle."

Beverly chuckled at that. The Klingon Empire had a lengthy history of warfare, but the Dominion War was the first time they'd fought for such a protracted period alongside such powerful allies. suppose it's bound to have an effect, she thought.

Showing off her medical ward with a gesture, B'Oraq continued "So they finally allowed me to design a new medical facility. Mind you, what you see here is not what I originally designed. For one thing, more or less every cosmetic application was rejected--we are too proud of our scars, it would seem." Smiling, Beverly said, "This is an empire with a one eyed chancellor."

B'Oraq laughed. "True, true. However, this is only the beginning. The door is open, but I am determined that by the time I die, Defense Force vessels will have sickbays to match those of Starfleet."

"If anyone can do it, you can."

Beverly had first met B'Oraq ten years ago, while serving as the head of Starfleet Medical. Sitting in her office, going over starship personnel requisitions, Beverly had been interrupted by an auburn-haired Klingon, demanding to know why she was being discriminated against.

Knowing that the empire had appallingly bad medical standards, B'Oraq--the daughter of a physician--decided not only to follow in her father's footsteps, but to bring better medicine to her people. To that end, she applied to the Starfleet Medical Academy. When she barged into Beverly 's office, she was in her final year, and working at Spacedock's medical facility. Where her classmates worked with patients, sat in on surgical procedures, and gained valuable experience, B'Oraq had been given all scut work and the simplest patients to handle.

Beverly investigated, and it turned out that B'Oraq's supervisor had, not unreasonably, assumed that B'Oraq-who had made clear her intention to return to the Empire after graduation--would not be practicing medicine at anything near Starfleet's standard. B'Oraq pointed out that she intended to raise that standard, but she couldn't if she never got the diversified experience her classmates were getting.

With Beverly 's help, she got that experience, and the two of them remained in touch for the rest of Beverly 's tenure at Starfleet Medical.

"I even managed to get some prosthetics on board," B'Oraq was saying, opening a storage locker that was full of an assortment of limbs and other body parts, "though they're not officially part of our manifest.

But I got them from the same Ferengi dealer who supplies Captain Klag with his blood wine so I doubt there will be any problems."

"Well, B'Oraq, I have to say, I'm im. I was skeptical ten years ago, but it looks like you've done wonders here."

"As I said, I have only started." She sat back down at her desk, indicating the guest chair for Beverly. "So how have you been?"

"Busy," Beverly said as she took the chair. "War is always boom-time for doctors. I've done more surgery in the last two years than I did in the ten years previous. But we did well. Ninety-nine percent of the people who actually made it to sickbay lived to tell about it."

"Excellent."

"I suppose," Beverly said with a sigh. The problem, she thought, were all those who never made it to sickbay.

"As I recall, you had a son who served on the Enterprise with you, yes?

Is he well?"

"Well enough," Beverly said with a lopsided smile. "He's, ah, not with Starfleet anymore. He's--traveling." How do I explain to B'Oraq that my son is living on another plane of existence when I don't entirely understand it myself?

She was saved from having to explain further by the door to the medical ward opening on a face Beverly had never expected to see again.

"Kurak?"

Kurak--now wearing the uniform of a commander-looked at Beverly and snarled. Then again, Kurak always seemed to be snarling. Her large brown eyes always smoldered with anger, and her lips were always pursed, when they weren't curled in a snarl. "You! What are

you doing here?"

"She is my friend, Kurak," B'Oraq said, then looked at Beverly .

"I take it you two know each other."

"This todsah invited me onto her ship," Kurak said before Beverly could answer, "for a demonstration of a met aphasic shield. When its inventor was killed, your friend accused me of the murder."

"Kurak, I--" Beverly started.

"I do not wish to hear it," Kurak said, holding up her hand. "I have business to discuss with the doctor. You will leave--now."

B'Oraq snarled. "This is not engineering, Kurak. In the medical ward, say who stays and goes."

"It's all right," Beverly said, getting up, not wanting to start a dispute between doctor and engineer. "I should probably be getting back to the Enterprise in any case. It was good seeing you again, B'Oraq."

Well, there's something I never expected to come back and bite me on the rear, Beverly thought as she left the Gorkon's medical ward. Her attempt to sponsor Dr. Reyga, a Ferengi scientist, and his met aphasic shield was not one of Beverly 's proudest moments, seeing as it cost Reyga his life and almost cost Beverly her career. To be honest, Kurak has every right to be angry with me.

She stood in the corridor, trying to adjust her eyes. The transporter room was this way, I think. She hated trying to navigate by herself on a Klingon ship; they always kept the lights dimmed to near-darkness.

Medically, she understood the reasons--Klingons were much more

sensitive to bright lights than humans--but it didn't make it easier for her to stumble her way around.

"Excuse me?" said a surprisingly timid voice.

Beverly turned to see a very strange sight a well groomed Klingon. His hair was short and combed, something Beverly had only seen on Worf--and he did so only to conform to Starfleet uniform standards. More unusually, this Klingon lieutenant had no facial hair whatsoever, his teeth were straight, and he seemed to have an athletic, swimmer's build .

"Uh, yes?" she said.

"I am looking for Commander Kurak. Did she just go into the medical ward?" The voice was not only timid, but slightly nasal.

"Yes, she did."

"Good." The Klingon stared at her for a moment, then said, "You look familiar--do I know you?"

"I don't think so," Beverly said, perhaps too emphatically. would've remembered if I met this one before.

Suddenly, the Klingon straightened. "You are Beverly of the House of Crusher! You are the doctor who performed the blood test on Kahless n to prove his legitimacy on the Enterprise !" Blinking, Beverly said, "Uh, yes--yes, that was me."

"It is a great honor to meet you, Doctor!" the Klingon said eagerly.

"Uh, if you don't mind, Lieutenant--?"

"Vail."

Beverly nodded in acknowledgment. "How did you know that was me?"

Vail blinked, as if the question was ridiculous. "It is in the song."

"Song?"

"The song about Kahless's return. You are in the fourth verse. I will sing it for you."

Vail took a deep breath, as if about to break into song. Holding up a hand to head off this dire possibility, Beverly said, "No, no, that's okay. I, uh--I really have to be getting back to the Enterprise, but it was a pleasure meeting you, Vail."

"The pleasure was mine, Doctor!"

"Don't mention it." Please, don't ever mention it ... Vail walked quickly toward the medical ward.

Beverly stood in the corridor for a moment. Well, that was weird.

She continued her journey to the transporter room, debating with herself whether or not to look up the song about Kahless's return on the Enterprise computer.

"So," Martok said as two civilians brought trays of food for him and Worf, "how are you liking the new post so far?"

"The honor is to serve," Worf said as one of the trays was placed

before him.

Martok laughed. "So you hate your new role as much as I do. Good. It serves you right for forcing me into mine."

"Hate is too strong a word. I view it as--a challenge."

Scooping a handful of skull stew into his mouth, Martok said, "As well you should. I regret giving you such a vexing one to start. But we need speak no more of that. You know my feelings, and I would not wish Klag to think we were plotting behind his back. We have concluded our business. Now is a time for family." Martok sighed. " Which reminds me of one other piece of business that perhaps w e should discuss.

Family business."

"Oh?"

"As you may know, my son Drex is the first officer on the Gorkon."

"Yes." Worf had been expecting something like this from the moment he saw Drex's name on the ship's crew roster.

"I would ask a favor of you, Worf. Keep an eye on him."

Then again, I was not expecting that ..."An eye for what, precisely?"

"My son has many flaws, as you well know. He has always preferred to let his father's honor speak for him instead of creating his own. He grew worse during the time I was captured by the Jem'Hadar and that Lubbockian slime devil of a changeling took my place." Martok spat on the deck. Worf could sympathize. The idea that someone had taken over your life--the way one of the shape-shifting Founders had done to

Martok four years ago--was not appetizing. If the changeling had not been so publicly unmasked on Ty'Gokor as it was, Martok's honor may never have recovered.

"What is it you wish of me?" Worf asked.

"I speak not as chancellor to ambassador, but as brother to brother, Worf. Help him find his own honor."

Worf refrained from pointing out that one cannot find something that does not exist. Instead he simply said, "I will try."

"That is all that I ask." He took a sip of blood wine

"Have you heard from Alexander?"

Taking a bite of bregit lung, Worf said, "Yes, briefly-before I left for Earth. He finds his new assignment challenging. He also sends his regards."

Martok laughed. "A Klingon sentiment, followed by a human one.

Appropriate for your son."

There was an awkward silence while both men ate their food and drank their blood wine Worf had never been comfortable talking about his son. Alexander seemed to be turning out all right, but that was through little of Worf's own doing.

Perhaps inspired by the mention of Alexander, Martok broke the silence with a very human question "Are you all right, Worf?" Worf shook his head and almost smiled. He had hoped that his facade had remained intact, that Martok could not see the turmoil he was going through. In his life, only four people had ever been able to see past it--

or, at least, had done so and were willing to say so to his face--the Rozhenkos, Jadzia, and Martok. The chancellor's ability to work past the barriers that Worf had spent a lifetime erecting was one of the many things that he admired about Martok, and why he felt so honored to be part of his House.

"No, I am not," he said, and then added, very reluctantly, "but I am afraid I cannot say why."

"Cannot, or will not?"

"Both," Worf said. "It is--personal." He had been about to say it was a family matter, but that would make it Martok's business. "I cannot discuss it, even with you."

"Will it affect the mission?"

"I do not believe so," Worf said carefully. The fact of the matter was, he had no idea what effect it would have.

Drex's was not the only familiar name on the Gorkon's crew roster.

There was the second officer, Toq, one of the children Worf had rescued from the prison camp on Car raya--Worf looked forward to seeing the young man again.

And then there was the primary-shift gunner Rodek, son of Noggra.

A false name that Worf himself had given to Kurn, son of Mogh. His brother.

When Worf had opposed Gowron's invasion of Car dassia four years previous, Gowron had cast Worf out of the empire, seized his family's lands, and removed Worf's younger brother Kurn from the High

Council.

Kum had come to Deep Space Nine to ask Worf to perform the Mauk-to'Vor on him, but Captain Sisko had forbidden it--what would be a proper ritual in the empire was murder on a Bajoran station, and Sisko would not allow one of his senior staff to kill his own brother.

Kufn was unable to die with honor and unable to go on living. Worf found only one solution have Dr. Bashir erase Kurn's memory and surgically alter his crest, and then create a false record. "Rodek" was born from the ashes of Kurn.

Now Worf was a hero of the empire, a respected member of the chancellor's House. However, his brother unknowingly still lived the lie necessitated by a dishonor that no longer existed.

But aside from Noggra, who took Rodek in, and Worf himself, no one in the empire could know of this. Not even Martok.

"Worf, if you are hiding something from me that will affect what happens at tad--"

"I will see that it does not, Chancellor," Worf said formally. "You have my word."

Martok gazed upon Worf with his one good eye, and finally said, "Very well. Your word has always been more than enough. We will speak no more of it."

And they did not.

"It was a glorious battle," Klag said as he opened a third bottle of blood wine and poured it. Most of it landed inside the mug; the rest splashed onto the table. Klag didn't seem to notice or care. "Twelve ships against six Breen and Jem'Hadar vessels. When it was over, only

two remained the Pagh and one of the Jem'Hadar ships. But we were both severely damaged. The fifth planet was breathable, so Kargan ordered us to land there. The Jem'Hadar did the same."

Riker took a hearty gulp from his own mug of blood wine still from the first bottle. Anti-inebriant notwithstanding, he was feeling a bit woozy, while Klag--who had drunk about four times as much--showed no signs of even slowing down.

"Our stabilizers were a thing of the past. The moment we hit the atmosphere, we were thrown across the ship like riders on a bucking mount. By the time I regained my senses, I was on the deck, my right side pinned by what was left of the command chair." He snorted. "The chair had been sliced in half, and one of those halves was presently weighing me down. I couldn't feel my right arm, but I could see it sticking out from the other side of the debris. With a mighty shove, I rolled the twisted piece of metal off with my left hand--and then I stood to get a damage report." Klag took a long gulp of blood wine

"My right arm remained on the deck."

Riker let out a breath he hadn't even realized he was holding. Even though he knew that the story would have Klag losing his arm at some point, Riker had found himself sufficiently engrossed that it still came as a surprise. He drained his mug of blood wine "That must've hurt."

Pouring Riker some more before the commander could stop him, Klag replied, "Actually, no. I felt only anger-which increased a hundredfold when I saw that I was the only one who had survived the crash." Klag set down the bottle and clenched his fist. "I was furious! For such a fine crew to have survived the Jem'Hadar, only to die like that!"

Leaning back and smiling, Klag said, "But then I saw the corpse of Captain Kargan. It was a sight I had long awaited."

Riker leaned forward. He had half-expected the glee with which Klag described Kargan's death. The general impression Riker had of Kargan

from his time as the latter's first officer was that the captain would be removed due to his own ineptitude ere long. The fact that he hadn't had always confused Riker.

"What you did not know about the captain," Klag said, "is that he was the son of General Talak--and the nephew of Councilor K'Tal."

Riker nodded. He didn't know much about Talak, but K'Tal was one of the more respected members of the High Council. Riker had met K'Tal eight years earlier when the councilor supervised the installation of Chancellor Gowron. "Friends in high places, huh?"

"The highest. So I was trapped under that fool. He blocked any opportunity for me to be promoted off the Pagh, keeping me firmly under his heel while he stumbled through command with the same idiocy he displayed against the Enterprise ."

Shortly after Riker had reported to the Pagh as first officer, the vessel was afflicted with a corrosive element. Kargan made the ludicrous leap in logic that the Enterprise had sabotaged the Pagh during their rendezvous. Riker had defused the situation, but it was a close call. "Why didn't you challenge him?" Riker asked. It was, after all, Klag's right; indeed, Riker had invoked that right, after a fashion, during the confrontation with the Enterprise .

"Oh, I could have, if I'd wanted to measure my life in microseconds.

Both K'Tal and Talak had minions on the Pagh who would make sure that no harm would come to Kargan. Even a successful challenge would have been a failure. I intend to die in battle, not in a dark corner at the hands of a paid assassin."

"So why didn't he challenge you?" Grinning, Klag said, "And lose what respect he'd scraped up for himself? His House kept him alive quite well, but even the finest assassin will not bring trust. He needed me to lead the crew so he would be spared having to."

"So seeing him dead wasn't exactly what you'd call a hardship," Riker said with a sardonic smile.

"No."

Taking another sip of blood wine Riker shook his head. Not for the first time, he realized he'd make a lousy Klingon. There was just no way he could take such pleasure in anyone's death, never mind advancing in rank that way.

Klag finished off his latest mug of blood wine and poured some more.

Riker had, at this point, lost count of how much the captain had drunk.

"So, as the only survivor, it was left to me and me alone to finish what we had started. After all, if I survived, some of the enemy might have as well--and that meant the battle was not yet over. I found a working scanner and saw that seven Jem'Hadar and one Vorta still lived amidst the wreckage of their ship. Armed with a mek'leth, I went to greet them." Smiling, Riker said, ""Greet' them, huh? And how'd they return the greeting?"

"Poorly," Klag said with a vicious grin. "Oh, it was magnificent Their Vorta had been injured, and their instru mentation destroyed in the crash. I had lost a great deal of blood, and should have felt the effects, but the death of my comrades put a fire in my belly. The Jem'Hadar may have been bred for combat, but the heart of a warrior cannot be grown in a Vorta laboratory. Within minutes, I stood amongst the corpses of my enemies, my mek'leth stained with their blood and the Jem'Hadar's drug." He gulped down more blood wine half of it running down into his goatee. Slamming the mug to the table, he smiled. "Then I passed out."

Riker laughed. "Good timing."

"Indeed. I came to on a ship, being examined by some doctor or other who had stanched the bleeding from my shoulder. I was told that our battle had paved the way for Defense Force and Starfleet vessels to penetrate the Allicar sector. I had left the Homeworld the lapdog of a fool. I returned as a hero of the empire." He indicated the ship around him with his hand. "I was given this as my reward."

"Quite a reward."

"Yes. One wonders why you have not been similarly blessed, old

friend."

Riker sighed. He had expected this subject to come up. After all, he had remained a first officer longer than Klag had. "Big difference between us, Klag. Kargan forced you to stay under his command. I remain with Captain Picard--and on the Enterprise --by choice."

"Then you are a fool. Whatever Picard's merits--and I admit, he has accomplished much--even he is not worth denying yourself the greatest glory of all."

Smiling, Riker quoted, ""Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven.""

Klag frowned. "What?"

Riker had uttered the quote in English. He repeated it in Klingon, substituting Sto-Vo-Kor for heaven and Gre'thor for hell. The translation didn't entirely hold up, as those two realms in Klingon mythology were not precise analogues to the human concepts. "It's from a human poet named John Milton. Basically, it means that it's better to be the ruler of a bad place than to be a subordinate in paradise."

Klag nodded. "Ah, I see. Obviously, you disagree with this poet"

"I didn't used to. Time was I lived my life by it. But that was before I signed onto the Enterprise --she's the finest ship in the finest fleet under the finest captain. I couldn't ask for a better place to serve, even if it means staying a first officer." Grinning, Klag said, "Plus, of course, there's that half Betazoid counselor of yours."

Riker laughed, and wondered if he blushed. His cheeks certainly felt flushed, but that could have been from the blood wine "Your sources are good, Klag. Yes, there is her also."

Klag shook his head. "You're a typical human, Riker. Sacrificing duty for the sake of par' Mach

"I'll take that as a compliment," Riker said, raising his mug.

Klag threw his head back and laughed. "Of course you do, my friend!"

Raising his own mug, he said, "I toast us both. Two warriors who have at last found their place in the universe." Riker smiled and clanked his mug against Klag's. "I'll drink to that."

Suiting action to words, he drained his mug. "And with that, I really do need to be getting back. We're due at Starbase 10 in two days."

Klag stood up; Riker did likewise. "It was good to see you again, my old comrade. Perhaps someday, we will fight side by side--you in the ship of your dreams, and I in mine."

Riker had had enough battles over the past couple of years to last him several lifetimes, but he gamely said, "It would be an honor, old friend."

"Good." Klag hesitated. "One question, before you go."

"What?"

Again, Klag hesitated. "Ambassador Worf. You served with him."

"For over seven years. He's one of the finest officers I've ever known."

"Then you think he is worthy of his new position?"

Folding his arms, and resisting the obvious answer to the question, Riker said, "I take it you don't?"

"What I think is that he received this post because he is of Martok's House, just as Kargan gained his by being of K'Tal's. And I have had my fill of such things."

Riker straightened. "Worf isn't Kargan. And the Federation isn't in the habit of basing its diplomatic assignments on nepotism."

Klag got a faraway look for a moment, then blinked at Riker. Then he laughed and slapped Riker on the shoulder --but it was not Klag's trademark throw-back-the head laugh, more of a snort or a chuckle, if a Klingon could ever be said to chuckle. "Perhaps not. Well, enough of this. You must be returning to your ship. And let me give you a piece of advice."

"Yes?"

"Grow the beard back. You look like a Romulan without it."

Returning Klag's laugh, Riker said, "I'll think about it. Qapla', Klag."

"Qapla', Riker. And farewell."

As Riker headed toward the Gorkon's transporter room, he thought, That's two Klingons who think I should grow the beard back. Maybe I should consider it. Then he remembered kissing Deanna while still bearded and her subsequent reaction "Yuck."

Naaaaahh.

When Worf concluded his meal with Martok, he was greeted in the transporter room by Drex.

"Commander," Worf said as he stepped down from the platform. "Has my aide arrived?"

"Yes," Drex said. "I will take you to your quarters." Drex then walked up to Worf and stared him directly in the eyes. "We are House-mates now, son of Mogh. See that that does not change."

Worf had to stop himself from rolling his eyes. But then, he did not expect Drex to make it easy for Worf to fulfill Martok's request. "If it does change, Drex, it will be of no consequence."

Drex snorted, then turned and exited the room. Worf followed.

A woman in a bekk's uniform stood at attention outside the quarters where Drex led Worf.

"This," Drex said as the doors opened at their approach, "is Krevor.

She has been assigned to you for the duration of this mission. Unless," Drex added with a sneer, "you have some objection."

Sighing, Worf said, "I have none."

Drex glared at Worf. "Very well. If there is anything you need, Ambassador--I am sure you will know how to obtain it."

With that, Drex turned on his heel and left.

Worf shook his head as he entered his quarters. He suspected that Drex had deliberately chosen a female as an insult. However, if Worf was insulted by anything, it was Drex's belief that Worf would be so easily offended.

The room he entered was large by Defense Force standards, which meant it was still smaller than anything on the Enterprise. In fact, it reminded Worf of the quarters he had taken on the Defiant, though this had two separate beds instead of bunks. He and Wu were meant to share.

The latter sat on one of the beds. He rose at Worf's entrance. "I may be going out on a limb here, sir," he said slowly, "but I get the feeling there's some bad blood between you and the commander."

Worf nodded, and noted that his duffels were on the floor next to the other bed. "We met when I was first assigned to Deep Space Nine. It was shortly before the empire's invasion of Cardassia. Drex was bullying the station's personnel, and he assaulted one of the Promenade shopkeepers. Drex is also the son of Martok."

"Ah, I see," Wu said. The aide still wore the red vest, now over a black shirt and dark green trousers. "He assumed that his family status gave him carte blanche to act like an idiot," Worf nodded as he set the Kahless-and-Morath statue on the desk.

"Something like that. I challenged Drex and took his d'k tahg in order to get Martok's attention. Or, at least, the person I thought was Martok."

"The changeling?" Wu asked.

Again, Worf nodded. "After I rescued the real Martok from the Jem'Hadar prison camp, he made me part of his House. Drex objected."

"Because of the way you embarrassed him?"

"Yes. But Martok knew nothing of that, and did not care."

Wu shook his head and chuckled. "So Drex is stuck between a rock and a hard place. You're an honored part of the House, so he has to treat you as such--or, at least, not actively challenge you--but he hates your guts."

"An apt summary," Worf said.

"We'll need to keep an eye on him, then," said Wu, pulling his padd out of his vest pocket and making notes on it. "Someone with that kind of grudge could cause problems."

The door chime rang.

"Enter," Worf said.

Krevor stood in the doorway. "May I speak with you, Ambassador?"

"Of course," Worf said, taking a seat at the desk.

The young woman entered. She had fairly straight black hair, dark eyes, and a soldier's bearing. "I just would like you to know, sir, that I consider this assignment to be a great honor, and that I look forward to the opportunity to die for you."

Noble sentiments, Worf thought, but said in a rote manner. He suspected there was more to this. "But--?"

"If you feel that I am not worthy of this assignment, I would not be insulted if you requested another."

Worf leaned back in his chair. "Really? And why wouldn't you be?"

Krevor frowned. "Sir?"

"Are you not a loyal soldier of the empire, the same as the others who serve on this vessel?"

She straightened. "Of course, sir!"

"Then if I did request another, why would this not insult you? If I were in your place, I would not suffer such an offense lightly."

"That is not what I meant, sir."

"But it is what you said."

Now Krevor started to shift her weight from foot to foot. "May I speak freely, sir?"

Worf nodded.

"I believe that Commander Drex gave this assignment to me in order to give you offense. I merely did not wish you to suffer it needlessly."

Worf regarded her. "Why would you in particular give me offense? We have never met. Our Houses cannot be in conflict, since Commander Drex and I are both o f the House of Martok.

If any such conflict existed, he would have addressed it by now."

Krevor blinked in surprise. "No, sir. I have no House. That is why I joined the Defense Force--to make my own honor, since I cannot take refuge in the honor of my House." Unlike her offering of her life, this statement was said with feeling. "I simply meant that he gave the

assignment to a female, sir."

"You are quite presumptuous, Krevor. You assign motives to your superior officer. You presume that I am incapable of detecting those motives myself. And you think me to be ignorant."

"Sir?"

"Did Lukara not fight alongside Kahless at Qamchee? Was Melota not Aktuh's equal in battle? Did Azetbur not finish the work begun by her father, for whom this ship was named?" Worf stood up and faced the young woman. "The body is but a shell. If you have the heart of a warrior, it does not matter the form that contains that heart."

Krevor closed her eyes. "I have committed the very offense I sought to spare you. I offer my life in restitution."

Worf shook his head. "Your life was mine the moment you received this assignment. For me to take it now would be--wasteful. Return to your post."

If Krevor felt relief at her life being spared, she did not show it.

Instead, she simply said, "Yes, sir," turned around, and exited the room.

As the doors closed, Wu let out a small chuckle. "Klingon sexism--gotta love it."

Sparing Wu a mild glare, Worf called up Krevor's record. She, indeed, had no House, having been raised in a brothel, the daughter of a deceased harlot and one of her customers. When she had reached the Age of Ascension, she joined the Defense Force. Her ignoble birth had left her no chance of being an officer, but she did not let that stop her.

Now there were layers to Drex's insult. Besides being a female, Krevor was also a reminder that the House of Mogh into which Worf had been born no longer existed, thanks to Worf's own actions. If not for Martok, Worf would still have no House.

But I will not do him the honor of acknowledging it, Worf thought as he turned to the computer station on the desk. Besides, Krevor's record was excellent. She'd served well during the war, and even gained a commendation --no small feat for a House-less provincial. That she had overcome the obstacles of her birth spoke well of her.

Worf doubted Drex would appreciate that.

Klingon ships did not come equipped with windows, so Worf programmed his computer station to provide a view of the Enterprise and the Sword of Kahless as they went into warp--the former on a heading that would take it to Starbase 10 near the Romulan border, the latter toward Qo'nos. After a moment, the Gorkon did likewise, heading for tad.

Worf's Starfleet career had been like an opera, whose overture had been his acceptance into the Academy. The songs included battles against foes ranging from the omnipotent Q to the relentless Borg to the ruthless Jem'Hadar. He had visited dozens of parallel universes, survived torture at the hands of both Romulans and Breen, and held the legendary Sword of Kahless. He had gained friends, lost comrades, and met the brother he never knew he had. He had witnessed the "rebirth" of Kahless as a clone, and helped install him as emperor. He had twice survived exile from his own people.

He had killed a chancellor in honorable combat and named his successor.

He had seen two mates die. He had raised a son.

Our triumph on Cardassia was truly the final song, Worf thought.

Everything since--the farewell party on DS9, seeing my parents and Jeremy on Earth, traveling on the Enterprise --have been the curtain calls.

Now the performance has ended. It is time to begin a new saga.

He shut off the computer station.

Chapter Three.

If Leskit had known that B'Elath would sing all fifteen verses of

"The Campaign at Kol'Vat," he'd have eaten dinner in his quarters.

Shortly after the shakedown cruise had commenced, it became a tradition on the Gorkon for someone to sing before the evening meal. Leskit generally didn't object to this, as long as the song was decent and short.

"The Campaign at Kol'Vat" was neither. It told of a battle at Goqlath Castle in Kol'Vat, in which the hero Krim enabled his forces to storm the castle by slitting the throats of the castle guards during a moonless night. Some said that it was from the stories of Kol'Vat that the saying, "Four thousand throats may be cut in one night by a running man" derived, though many linguists felt that the quote predated both the song and the campaign.

Leskit had never liked the song or the saying--he'd seen the ruins at Kol'Vat, and at most they would have had two hundred guards, not four thousand, and then only if they stood crammed side by side. The tune was rote, the rhymes were pedestrian, the meter was stultifying-

and B'Elath, one of the engineers, was also a terrible singer.

Worse, dinner would not be served until she finished the fifteenth verse.

Leskit looked around, surprised to see that neither Klag nor Drex had joined them. The captain and first officer were by no means required to dine with the troops, but over the past month one of them always did, if not both. The ambassador hadn't joined them, either, but Worf hadn't attended troop dinners when he served as first officer on the Rotarmn during the war, so Leskit hadn't expected that.

The pilot stroked his white beard, which he had trimmed to resemble a pair of horns pointing downward. He had to admit to some amusement at Worf's appointment. He was very curious to see how this mission would turnout.

Kurak wasn't present, either, but Leskit had come to expect that. The chief engineer always ate in her cabin. A pity, he thought. There's fire in that one. So far, though, Leskit hadn't been able to warm his hands in that fire. But he had hope.

Just as Leskit was about to give up and follow Kurak's example, B'Elath sang the longed-for final verse, the warriors in the mess hall cheered--No doubt, Leskit thought, grateful that this particular nightmare is over--and several people brought the dinner out.

Right away, Leskit's mood improved. He had always considered himself something of an epicure, and years of service had led him to expect horrendous food from Defense Force replicators. But the food on the Gorkon had become quite good over the last month.

Leskit grabbed some bregit lung, a handful of gagh, and some rokeg blood pie, and took a seat at the small table where his shift of the bridge crew generally sat. Rodek and Toq were already there--as was, to Leskit's dismay, Vail.

Leaving aside Vail--which Leskit was happy to do in any case--the three of them made an odd combination. Toq was young, relatively short, but well-built. His beard was unformed and unshaped, as if he hadn't figured out what to do with it. Yet, for all that he looked like he'd just stumbled out of Defense Force Training a week ago, he moved with a warrior's confidence, as Kegren had learned to his dismay. He had made himself third in command of the ship.

Rodek, on the other hand, had all the markings of a warrior. He wore a simple mustache beginning above the corners of the mouth and curling down in a crescent shape. Half the men on the ship wore that, including Drex. Rodek was tall, broad, and carried the weight of his years. Yet he never displayed any of the passion Leskit would have expected.

As for Leskit himself, he was old for his rank, but he did not care.

Rank was not for him; he knew that none would follow him into battle.

His lot was to be led, not to lead, and so he remained a pilot. He fully expected to die a lieutenant, and he was content with that, as long as the death was in battle.

Biting off a talon of pi pius claw, Toq said, "This will be a glorious mission."

"How's that, Toq?" Rodek asked. "We're just going back to tad."

"Yes, but look who we serve with! Already blessed with the Hero of Marcan and the son of Martok, now we have the noble Worf on board!"

Leskit rolled his eyes. "Worf is a Klingon like the rest of us."

"Less than the rest of us," Rodek said. "He lives with the Federation."

"I wouldn't go that far," Leskit said. "I served with him during the war. He's as fine a warrior as you'll find."

As he slathered grapok sauce on his racht, Toq said, "He is more than that. He rescued me and many others from Carraya. He taught us the Klingon ways."

"Didn't you know them already?" Vail asked.

Toq shook his head. "We were very young when we crashed. I owe Worf more than my life--I owe him my heritage."

"What does he know of our heritage?" Rodek asked with obvious disdain.

"Enough to tell us of Kahless, and the true meaning of being a warrior.

Enough to teach me of the hunt. Enough to tell me who I was. I would not be here if not for him."

Rodek shrugged and bit through the heart of a targ. "I could say the same, I suppose. He rescued my shuttle when it crashed near that Federation outpost by the Bajoran wormhole. But I don't let that distract me from the truth."

Toq glared at the gunner. "And what truth is that?"

"That he remains in the Federation. Wears their colors. They may be our allies, but they are sheep. How can a true warrior live among such as them?"

"He is a true warrior, make no mistake of that," Toq said, throwing his racht back onto his plate, splattering grapok sauce all over the table.

"You yourself said you only knew about being a warrior from him," Rodek said, and Leskit had to admit that the gunner had a point.

Toq smiled. "I don't think Kegren has any doubts about my skills as a warrior, Rodek. Or would you like to find out for yourself?"

Les kit rolled his eyes. "Will you two calm down, please? We're trying to eat. Besides, splattered blood will ruin the taste of my dinner."

Vail spoke up in that Ferengi-like whine of his, which was almost enough to put Leskit off his feed. "Actually," he said, "Worf was raised in the Federation. Until they made him ambassador, he was highly decorated by Starfleet."

"Decorated for what? Charting solar systems?" Rodek said with a sneer while wiping his hands on his uniform.

"No, he fought against the Borg, the Cardassians, the Romulans, the Jem'Hadar, the Ferengi, the Tamarians," Vail said in a cadence-free drone. "He was one of the first people ever to see a Borg. He helped rescue Captain Picard after the Borg captured him, as well. He's--"

"Enough!" Leskit cried. "I like to sleep after dinner, Vail, not before I've finished it."

"None of that explains why he joined Starfleet," Rodek said.

Vail said, "His family was killed at the Khitomer massacre, and he was rescued by a Starfleet ship. A Starfleeter raised him, and then when he was old enough, he went to their Academy."

"A debt of honor," Toq said with a nod.

Rodek looked at Vail with a questioning gaze. "Khitomer massacre? What are you talking about?"

Leskit blinked. "Thirty years ago, Rodek. You were only a boy then, but you must have heard about it. A Romulan attack?"

"I know Khitomer is where the treaty with the Federation was signed after Praxis was destroyed, but--" Rodek hesitated. "I'm sorry, but my memory is filled with-gaps. That crash left me badly damaged. I don't remember anything of my life before then."

Toq laughed a contemptuous laugh. "And you accuse Worf of being a false Klingon? You, who have only been Klingon for a few years ."

Rodek stood, throwing his chair to the deck. The ends of his mustache flared as he cried, "I am as much a Klingon as you, boy! If you doubt it, a demonstration can be arranged."

The mess hall fell silent. Toq matched Rodek's gesture, the clattering of his own chair now the only sound in the hall. Toq stood eye to eye with the gunner. "I have already killed one fool on this ship, Rodek.

I'll be happy to make it two."

Wearily, Leskit said, "If you two are going to kill each other, just get it over with. All this yelling is adding to the headache I got from B'Elath's song."

"I thought she sang it very well," Vail said.

Leskit bit his tongue.

Toq and Rodek glowered at each other for another moment. Leskit feared that they would actually fight, meaning yet another delay in dinner while everyone watched these two idiots try to kill each other.

Then, finally, Rodek retrieved his chair and sat down. "I have no interest in the second officer's position. And Morketh isn't ready to take over as gunner just yet."

Toq laughed and also recovered his seat. "You may justify your cowardice any way you wish, Rodek. When your spine regrows, you will find my d'k tahg as eager to taste your blood as it was Kegren's."

As the pair of them went back to their food, Vail looked at Leskit.

"Lieutenant--are those real Cardassian neck bones

Idly, Leskit fingered the necklace made of bones that he always wore.

He had contemplated removing the trophy once the war ended, but he got a certain pleasure out of the looks he got from the younger warriors when they saw it. Vail, in fact, had that look on his face right now.

"Oh, yes," he said. "They came from real Cardassians. Or at least, formerly real ones."

"Those are difficult to dislodge, from what I hear." Shaking his head, Leskit thought, A true warrior wouldn't need to add that last phrase. He took a bite of the rokeg blood pie. "This is good," he said with some surprise. He'd had blood pie his first night on the Gorkon and left it unfinished, it was so inedible. The subsequent month had dulled the bad aftertaste, and the food smelled good enough tonight that Leskit had decided to give it another shot Obviously, he thought, someone has tinkered. "A pity Kurak isn't here," he said aloud. "I'd

congratulate her on the food replicators myself."

"You're wasting your time, Leskit," Rodek said. "I served with Kurak on the Lallek. You'd have a better chance " the matter anti-matter chamber."

"I'll see for myself, if it's all the same to you, Rodek."

"Actually," Vail said, while attempting to puff himself up like a beast who had cornered its prey, "I was the one who conquered the replication matrix's inability to provide proper sustenance." Then he deflated somewhat, looking more like the Grishnar cat he truly resembled. "And I would rather you did not tell Commander Kurak, since she ordered me not to."

Toq laughed. "You disobeyed an order?"

"Well, not exactly." Vail squirmed a bit. "She didn't specifically order me not to upgrade the replicators--but every time I suggest such an upgrade, she objects. I had mapped out a magnificent battle plan for modifying the ODN conduits, only to have her scream at me about only doing what she tells me to do."

Leskit shook his head as he chewed on his blood pie. Battle plan for modifying the ODN conduits? Give me strength ... Toq frowned. "Why would she wish you not to improve the ship's systems?"

Vail shrugged. "I do not know. But the food replicators were not worthy of this vessel, so I defeated the pattern enhancers and put new ones in their place--these enhancers are twice as powerful as the ones that--"

"Enough!" Leskit cried again. "I'd rather listen to those two fight over Worf again than listen to you drone, Vail."

"My apologies, Lieutenant, but--this is a great ship, but there are so many ways it could be made even more worthy."

"A new assistant chief engineer would be a fine start," Rodek said.

All three of them laughed. Vail sulked. A pity such brilliant talent is trapped in such a repugnant form, Leskit thought. He wondered if he would be doing the boy a favor by killing him rather than forcing him to endure continuing to live as--well, as Vail.

Then he took another bite of the excellent blood pie, and decided that, if Vail could live with himself, so could Leskit.

"Alert status!" Rodek's voice on the speakers making this announcement combined with the sound of the alarm, startled Worf awake. He took all of a nanosecond to remember where he was--the feeling of the metal slab under his back meant he was on a Klingon ship, which in turn brought his current mission back to his quickly awakening conscious mind.

Then he rose from the bed--a padd that had rested on his chest clattering to the floor--and went to the computer station on the desk, inputting commands for the view from the bridge's security camera. This required access codes that a Federation ambassador normally would not possess--but most Federation ambassadors hadn't served on Klingon ships, nor had lengthy tenures in Starfleet security.

Wu got up groggily from his bed and stood behind Worf to observe as well, pausing to retrieve the padd and place it on the table with the others. Worf had fallen asleep while working on the specifications for a portable scattering field generator--which could temporarily disable any handheld disrupter weapons within a certain radius.

The camera was positioned just below the bridge's viewscreen. Klag sat in his command chair, leaning slightly forward, gazing straight at the viewscreen with an eager face--appropriate for one going into battle.

Drex was moving aft toward Toq's station. Toq looked even more eager than Klag. Next to him at the gunner's station, Rodek looked more impassive. Off to the side, Leskit looked almost bored--but Leskit always looked like that.

"Damage report," Drex barked.

"Shields holding," said Rodek. "No appreciable damage."

"The ship is running away," Toq said. "Course eight three-seven mark nine."

Worf called up the tactical schematics. The ship had come screaming toward the Gorkon at Warp 9 7, fired a salvo of phasers, then had, as Toq said, run. It had come in too fast for sensors to get a positive identification.

Drex asked, "Do we pursue, Captain?"

Klag shot Drex a harsh look. "Of course. Pilot, change course to intercept, maximum warp. Gunner, the second we're in range, fire on the enemy and destroy them." Leskit said, "We will intercept in seven minutes."

Drex walked fore and leaned toward Klag. Speaking in a voice meant not to be heard by anyone on the bridge other than the captain, he said, "Captain, the ambassador may object to this course change."

Klag regarded his first officer with disdain. "Let him."

Worf stood up.

"Let me guess," Wu said, "you'll be on the bridge?"

"Good guess," Worf said dryly as he left the cabin.

Krevor silently followed.

The moment the doors parted to let Worf in, Klag, without even turning around, said, "Ambassador, this is not a good time."

"Have you identified the ship that fired on us?" Now Klag did turn. "Not yet," he said slowly.

"It might be wise to do so before engaging them again."

"Ambassador," Klag said, standing to face Worf, "this is not your concern. We will swat this glob fly and resume our course to tad."

"Anything that affects this mission is my concern, Captain. However, this attack on the Gorkon cannot go unanswered. Commander Drex's fears about my objections were unfounded."

Klag glowered at Worf, who simply stared back. The captain seemed to want to pursue the issue--or at least question Worf about his ability to navigate the Gorkon's security systems--but Worf had just given Klag what he wanted. Worf suspected that Klag had anticipated a fight.

Perhaps even desired one? Worf wondered. Klag had looked decidedly unhappy when Martok announced that Worf command ed the mission.

Leskit interrupted "Less than a minute to intercept."

Klag turned from Worf and sat back in the command chair. "Rodek?"

From behind Klag, the man who was once Worf's brother said, "Disrupters ready, Captain. Awaiting target."

Worf's heart sank. Rodek spoke with an appalling lack of passion. Worf remembered serving with Kurn on the Hegh'ta during the civil war between Gowron and Duras's sisters. He had a fire, a passion for combat that did Worf proud.

"In range," Toq said eagerly.

"Weapons firing." Rodek sounded barely interested in the concept.

"They have dropped out of warp."

"Stay with them, pilot," Klag said.

"It is a Kreel vessel, Captain," Toq said.

Worf blinked. Even if he had objected to this diversion, that objection would be gone the minute he learned it was Kreel they faced.

That race of carrion-pickers had been at odds with the Klingons for centuries. They were like Earth vultures, picking at the bones of the empire's conquests, but never doing any conquering themselves. Defense Force vessels had standing orders to destroy any Kreel ship that dared to challenge them.

Toq added, "But they have made modifications. That's why we couldn't identify them at first--they have Breen shields."

Pirated or obtained legitimately? Worf wondered. When the mission was over--if not sooner--he needed to report this to Starfleet

Intelligence.

"Destroy them, gunner," Klag said.

"Quantum torpedoes locked on target, and firing."

Worf turned to the viewscreen. Now that he got a good look at it, it was definitely a Kreel vessel they faced. The torpedo exploded upon impact against the Kreefs Breen shields.

"Minimal damage," Rodek said.

Klag stood up. "Minimal? Are our torpedoes malfunctioning?"

"Weapons are at peak efficiency, Captain. Their shields are simply too--"

Rodek was cut off by the impact of phaser blasts on the Gorkon's shields.

Drex bellowed, "Damage report!"

"Shields at forty-nine percent," said Rodek.

"Captain," Toq said. "The Kreefs matter anti-matter pods are starting to fluctuate. No, wait." He gazed at his console. "Returning to normal. But they came close to a critical reaction when our torpedo hit." Klag sat back down and smiled. "Engineering, increase power to shields. Gunner, UW spread of torpedoes."

"Aye, sir."

Kurak's voice came through the intercom. "You have full shields again.

Captain."

Worf blinked in surprise. He knew tactical systems in general quite well, and had studied the Gorkon's specs on the Enterprise. He didn't see how fifty-one percent of the shields' power could be restored that quickly.

Klag, however, didn't question this good fortune. He clenched his one fist. "Fire!" Worf frowned as he observed the dispersal pattern of the torpedoes. It was the default spread focused on one area of the shields, to batter that section at several points in the hopes of collapsing the shields. Given the apparent situation--that the Breen shields' power consumption was barely within the Kreel ship's tolerances--it would have made more sense to widen the spread to hit as many different points around the ship as possible and increase the strain.

That, he thought, would require a tactical officer with some imagination. Klag proceeded on the assumption that he had one. Rodek wasn't wrong--but Kurn would have widened the spread.

"Kreel shields at eighty percent," Rodek said.

Toq added, "Kreel matter anti-matter pods fluctuating. Containment breach in forty seconds."

"Move us out of the blast range, pilot, " Klag ordered, "Warp 1."

"Gladly, sir," Leskit said.

Within seconds, the Kreel ship exploded in a fiery barrage.

Cheers erupted throughout the bridge. An officer at an aft station

cried, "Death to the Kreel!" Leskit smiled. "Today was a good day for them to die."

Klag pounded the arm of his chair and laughed. "Well done, my soldiers, well done. That's one ship's worth of Kreel that no longer infest the galaxy. Pilot, resume course to tad, Warp 6." The last two words were said while Klag looked right at Worf, and the ambassador saw the challenge in the captain's eyes. They had been proceeding at Warp 6 since parting ways with the Enterprise and the Sword of Kahless, but between the delay and significant course changes necessitated by the Kreel battle, remaining at that speed would bring them to tad several hours behind schedule. Klag had all but dared Worf to challenge his decision.

Worf refused to rise to the bait. The situation on tad had gone on for several years; a few hours would make little difference. "I will be in my quarters, Captain," he said, and turned on his heel and left.

As soon as he entered his quarters, Krevor again taking up position outside his door, he asked Wu, "Did you monitor the battle?"

"Most of it. A security lockout kicked in about fifteen seconds after Lieutenant Toq identified them as Kreel."

Worf nodded. Drex or Rodek had probably changed the security codes.

"This is far from Kreel territory."

"They may have come here in order to raid the hulks left over from the war. There were a lot of conflicts near here."

"True. Still, it warrants investigating. Compose a report to Starfleet Intelligence on the Kreel's new acquisitions, and then see if there are any reports of Kreel activity in this sector over the last six months."

Making notes on his padd, Wu said, "Very good, sir."

"What did you do?"

Vail looked up from his station in engineering. The harsh-voiced questioner was Commander Kurak. She stood with one hand gripping the wrist of her other arm, which usually meant she was angry.

She does that, Vail thought, far too often. His stomachs felt like they were trying to meld into one, and he struggled to keep down the racht he'd been snacking on.

"Ah--what did I do when?"

"The shields. What did you do?"

"The shot from the Kreel blew out half the inverters, but the systems were still operational--it was merely physical damage to the inverters.

So I rerouted the systems through the backup matter anti-matter injectors."

"The injectors can't handle that much raw power!" Kurak screamed.

"You could have--"

Vail tried not to sink lower into his chair. "I--I modified the injectors with a conduit I designed a couple of years ago. It acts as a dampener while the energy goes through the injectors. It restored the shields to their former glory, and it would not have blown up the ship."

Kurak advanced on Vail. Vail tried to back his chair farther away from her, but he was already up against the console.

"I will not tolerate this behavior any longer, Lieutenant. For a month, you have pestered me with " and '." Your job as assistant chief engineer is to carry out my orders, and my orders are to keep ship's systems operating within specified parameters nothing more! Is that understood?"

"B-but, Commander--"

"Is that understood?"

Vail fidgeted in his chair. "Yes, Commander."

"If you perform another modification like that without permission, I will kill you. Slowly. And painfully."

Before Vail could reply, Kurak stomped out of engineering.

The other engineers went about their business, ignoring Vail.

Technically, of course, Vail was their superior, though none of them treated him that way. Not that he minded. As long as they left him alone, he was happy, and they did that as long as Vail made them look good.

Heading to his quarters at shift's end, he bumped into Toq in the hallway.

"Hello, Toq."

"What do you want?"

"I--I am merely heading to my cabin."

Toq laughed. "Then don't let me get in your way." Vail continued to walk, then Toq called out his name.

"Yes?" Vail asked.

Toq turned and closed the distance between them. "Was it you who got the shields back up to full so quickly?"

Flattered at having his work recognized, Vail nodded.

"That was impressive work. Commander Kurak chose well when she made you her assistant."

Vail shifted uncomfortably. "She didn't. The original chief engineer died honorably in a duel. The commander was assigned after that, but the staff was already in place." Quickly he added, "Not that she didn't deserve it. She was the one who designed the previous flagship, the Negh'Var, before she joined the Defense Force. She was one of the greatest warp field specialists in the empire!"

"Commander Kurak's life doesn't really interest me," Toq said dryly.

"But you may want to share that information with Leskit, given the way he talked at dinner yesterday."

"Perhaps that would be good for her," Vail muttered. "Toq, I don't know what to do. There are so many ways I could improve thi--"

"Vail, why are you here?" Blinking, Vail said, "What do you mean?"

"You're no warrior. What is a Grishnar cat like you doing among

targs?" Shaking his head, Vail said, "How come I'm not working at the Science Institute or something, you mean? My parents and sister asked me the same question. They thought I was insane--and that I'd be dead in a week. But I'm still here! I'm in the Defense Force! This is where history is made, where battles are won, not in the Science Institute.

All the great stories are of war and battle--people like the captain and the ambassador. I want to be a part of that!"

Toq unsheathed his d'k tahg. Vail felt his racht coming up again. Toq and Vail were the same height and roughly the same weight, but Vail suddenly felt a good deal smaller. Toq stood so close to Vail that he could smell the grapok sauce on Toq's breath, and the hairs of Toq's untrimmed beard almost tickled Van's face.

"And what m akes you think," Toq asked with a vicious smile, holding the knife up to Van's throat, "that you deserve to be a part of that, Grishnar?" Vail saw a small, dark stain on the end of the blade, and wondered if that was Kegren's blood. He thought he smelled blood, but that could've been his imagination.

"I--I do my d-duty, just as you do! A-and more! Right now, I'm going to fix Bekk Goran's disrupter!"

Toq sneered. "Goran can get another disrupter."

"N-no, he can't! It's been in his family for generations. He told me his great-grandfather used it on Organia--I don't know if he speaks the truth, Dahar Master Kor only had a few troops on Organia--but he says he did, and he can't get rid of it without dishonoring his House, but it doesn't work properly, so he asked me to repair it, and I'm almost done, and I think he'll be extremely angry if you kill me now."

Vail inhaled sharply, having gotten that all out without taking a breath. He thought that if he paused to take a breath, Toq would slit his throat.

Toq leaned his head back and laughed heartily. Then, to Valts relief, he sheathed his d'k tahg. "You are-intriguing, Vail. You whine like a Ferengi, yet you perform magic with shields, make the first edible food I've had since I joined the Defense Force, and fix hundred year-old disrupters. A Grishnar who survives among the targs." He slapped Vail on the back.

Trying to keep his footing, Vail smiled nervously. "Thank you, Toq.

If I may ask--what can I do about Kurak? I don't understand her--you'd think she would want me to improve things. But she will not let me."

"If she's holding you back, Vail, there is only one thing you can do."

Toq once again unsheathed his knife. "Get her out of your way." With that, he turned on his heel, said, "See you at dinner, Grishnar," and walked off.

Wonderful, Vail thought. I'm probably stuck with that nickname. But he'd been called worse.

Continuing to his quarters, he thought at Toq's retreating back, It's fine for you to say get her out of my way-you actually know how to use that d'k tahg of yours. All I can do with mine is cut dead meat and pry open control panels. If I challenge Kurak, she

"II hand me my head.

Or worse.

Sighing, he entered his quarters. He had a disrupter to fix.

B'Oraq approached the captain's office. In one hand, she held a

casualty report. She tugged on her braid with the other. She had been surprised at the summons requesting her to hand-deliver the report. It wasn't necessary to provide it face to face; she could simply enter it into the computer, and Klag would have immediate access.

"Enter," came Klag's voice after the buzzer sounded. The doors parted loudly in response to the keyword.

She approached the desk, which naturally had no guest chair. "I have the casualty report," she said, holding it up.

"And?"

"Some contusions, mostly from falling objects. The bulk of the injuries came in the weapons bay--they lost gravity for two minutes.

But no fatalities."

"Good. The warriors of this ship deserve a better death than at the hands of the Kreel." Klag spit, then reached for the report. "Thank you, Doctor," he said as he took it.

"Captain, you didn't need me to bring this in person."

"No." Klag set the report aside. "But I did need to discuss the medical ward manifest. Specifically, what is not on it. Commander Drex told me that you have several additional items. The commander referred to them as ' and barbaric medical equipment.""

"Barbaric?" B'Oraq said with a bark of laughter. Drex had, of course, been referring to the prosthetics she had brought on board. "Captain, what is barbaric is--"

"Doctor," Klag interrupted, "I realize you studied medicine in the

Federation, so I'm willing to overlook that you forgot this is not a Federation ship--this time. We do not have a Starfleet vessel's luxury of excess. Nonregulation equipment must be removed. Lieutenant Toq can see to its removal."

"I'll have him stop at your quarters then, too."

Klag's face darkened. "What?"

"If we don't have the ' of excess," Captain, then those five cases of blood wine in your quarters will have to go as well. I know for a fact that they take up more mass than my tiny cabinet of prosthetics."

To her relief, Klag's face broke into a wide smile. "I should have known that Ferengi had more than blood wine in his cargo hold. Very well, Doctor, keep your vile toys. Though remember eventually my blood wine will be drunk. In fact, it's already down to four cases.

But those prosthetics of yours will molder in their cabinet."

"Plastiform doesn't molder, Captain," B'Oraq said tightly, "and you'd do well to consider one of them. It would get rid of that phantom itch you keep complaining to me about. And you'd be able to fight with both hands again."

"There are seven dead Jem'Hadar who can attest to my ability to fight with the one."

The problem with heroes, B'Oraq thought, is that they tend to believe their own stories. "Really?" she said with a smile. "Tell me, Captain, why do the Gorkon and the other Qang-class ships have upgraded weapons systems? Why the increased sensor capacity? The better shields?"

Klag glowered. "What is your point, Doctor?"

"The old weapons systems worked just fine against the Dominion. We won the war, after all. So why the upgrades to this ship?"

"There is a difference between people and equipment, B'Oraq."

"Yes, there is," B'Oraq said, leaning down onto Klag's desk and resting her palms so that she was face to face with the captain. "Equipment can be replaced. Adrenaline and surprise helped you defeat those Jem'Hadar on Mar can V, but another arm would've helped a lot more. Why make yourself an inferior warrior? It doesn't change what you did at Marcan. People won't stop singing about the heroic deeds of Klag, son of M'Raq, just because you replaced your right arm. And replacing it will increase the chances of there being more songs."

Klag stared at B'Oraq for many minutes. B'Oraq found she could not read his expression.

"Dismissed, Doctor."

B'Oraq straightened. At least he didn't kill me, B'Oraq thought. She had half expected Klag to do so, particularly when she brought up the blood wine But then, she had expected to die every single time she suggested that empire medical standards were, in fact, substandard and in need of improvement She never in her wildest dreams expected to get as far as designing her own medical ward. Each victory strengthened her convictions.

Leaving Klag's office alive with a mere dismissal definitely constituted a victory.

She smiled and pulled on her braid. Now if I can just get him to replace the arm ...

Chapter Four.

Three armed guards--civilian, not Defense Force-scanned Klag, Worf, Drex, Krevor, and Klag's guard the moment they materialized in the transporter room of Governor Tiral's satellite. The guards each wore leather armor, loosely based on hundred-year-old Defense Force uniforms, before the combination of metal and leather became standard issue.

"All weapons are within expected parameters," one of them said.

Another said, "Follow me."

At first Klag bristled at the insult of being scanned, but he understood the need for security. Obviously Tiral feared for his life--and there was no honor in being assassinated by jeghpu'wl'. The satellite had none of the austerity that Klag--having lived most of his life in the military, and before that as the son of an officer--had grown accustomed to. Instead of the standard Defense Force green, the walls here were a light brown, and were decorated--mostly, Klag noticed, with images of Tiral's face. There were also slogans on the walls in a particularly ornate Klingon script Death to the empire's enemies, Long live the High Council, Glory to Governor Tirol, and others in that vein.

Several workstations lined the walls, operated by either Klingons or al'Hmatti. The ones operated by Klingons were cluttered with personal items pictures, artwork, sculpture, miniature weapons, etc. Klag would never have allowed such luxuries on the Gorkon, but these were civilians. By contrast, the workstations occupied by the light-furred al'Hmatti--which were shaped differently to accommodate the ergonomic needs of a race evolved from ursine stock--were completely bereft of any decoration.

Tiral sat behind a large desk, cluttered with pad ds and remnants of food. He rose upon their entrance to his office, his belly scraping against the edge of the desk. The governor was shorter than Klag had

expected. Rounder about the middle, as well. Too much time administrating, not enough time in battle, Klag thought. He wore the traditional ankle-length vest indicating the holder of a high office, though, unlike the similar one Klag wore, Tiral's was lined with white fur. Under it, the governor wore a one-piece leather outfit that accentuated his rotund form.

"You are late," Tiral said sourly.

"We were delayed," Klag said.

Tiral seemed to expect more explanation, but Klag didn't see that it was any of Tiral's concern.

The three guards took up position behind Tiral's desk. None of them bolstered their disrupters. Three guest chairs sat opposite Tiral's desk, and Klag sat in the middle one, with Drex on his right, Worf on his left. The two Gorkon guards stood at the door. Klag was tempted to have them un holster their disrupters as well, but decided that that was unnecessary. He preferred to show confidence rather than paranoia.

"So," Tiral said with a small smile as he sat back down behind the desk, "my fortunes have finally changed. After months of the High Council ignoring my pleas, they send me the Hero of Marcan, the son of the chancellor, and the k ingmaker himself. I have to wonder what I have done to suddenly earn this."

Again Klag bristled, and this time he growled slightly. The High Council had granted Klag's petition due to his status as a hero, and taken the tad situation seriously in part due to his pleas. Tiral's implication that the current mission was a random event annoyed the captain.

"It is not what you have done, Governor," Worf said. "It is simply a case of timing. The situation on tad could not receive proper attention from either the empire or the Federation because of the war."

"I'm not clear what the Federation has to do with any of this, Ambassador," Tiral said. "Tad is a Klingon world."

"It wasn't when the al'Hmatti appealed to the Federation for assistance," Worf replied. "Nor was the Federation allied with the empire when that appeal was made."

Klag added, "Ambassador Worf is in charge of this mission, by command of Chancellor Martok himself."

Tiral pounded his fist on the desk, knocking two pad ds and some kroda leg stubs to the floor. "This is outrageous! They are jeghpu'wl'.

They have no more right to appeal to the Federation than my pet targ. I am responsible for this planet, Ambassador, and I will not have its fate decided by outsiders--especially not a coward who has lived his life among inferiors and who has twice been declared a traitor."

Worf rose from his chair. "This meeting is over."

"What?" Tiral and Klag said simultaneously. Klag wondered what the son of Mogh was playing at this time.

"There is no point to this," Worf said to Klag. "The solution to what ails tad is obvious--replace the governor. I daresay the situation has gotten out of hand because its current leader is not fit for the job.

As he himself said, he has been presented with the Hero of Marcan, the son of the chancellor, and a Federation ambassador. His response is to indulge in name-calling. Fit behavior for a tavern, perhaps, but not a meeting to settle an issue important to the empire."

Tiral also stood up, this time unsheathing a d'k tahg. "You dare insult

me?"

Behind him, the three guards moved forward, pointing their disrupters at Worf.

Worf ignored the guards and stared at Tiral without blinking. "I do not mean to insult, Governor. I have simply made a statement based on my interpretation of what I have been presented with. It is possible that my interpretation is in error." He leaned forward, resting his fists on the desk, knocking two pad ds aside. "Convince me that it is."

Klag watched the tableau with amusement. Much as Klag hated to admit it, Worf was playing this precisely the right way. Tiral was acting like a fool. If he took this to the next step and challenged Worf, it would simply prove Worf's point.

Keeping his smoldering gray eyes on Worf, Tiral slowly sheathed his blade, sat back down, and said through clenched teeth, "Very well."

The three guards lowered their weapons. Worf sat back down.

"I take it you are all familiar with the situation?" Tiral said, looking around the table.

"Yes," Worf said. "The al'Hmatti rebels successfully overthrew the Klingon overseers. Governor Kalax put himself to death in disgrace, Captain Lornak's fleet retook the planet, and you were assigned as the new overseer."

"Yes. And, I might add, top aline production has increased since I took over."

"As has al'Hmatti resistance," Klag said.

Tiral gritted his teeth. "Yes."

"Mass executions have failed?" Drex asked.

Nodding, Tiral said, "I have increased the number with each rebel action, but these creatures seem to care little about their own deaths.

I also had their emperor speak out against the rebels."

"They have an emperor?" Drex said.

Klag bared his teeth at his first officer. He had assumed that Drex had familiarized himself with the files on tad.

Worf said, "Before being conquered, the al'Hmatti had an emperor and ministry to govern the world. The empire overseers left the ministry intact for the day-to-day operation of the planet. Since the emperor also served as the al'Hmatti's spiritual leader, the governor at the time thought it best to leave her in place, but remove her political power."

"Putting the emperor to death was not an option, either," Tiral said.

"He is old and beloved, and would only serve as a martyr to the rebels' cause. Better that he speak on our behalf." Tiral snarled. "But that, too, has failed." Worf asked, "Have you attempted negotiation?"

"Are you mad? These arejeghpu'wl'. You do not negotiate with them--you force them to serve you, or you kill them."

"Since neither tactic has been effective," Worf said, "perhaps it is time to try something else. Do you have any way of contacting the rebels?"

"If I did, I would have crushed them by now."

Worf nodded. "As I suspected. I would like to meet with the prime minister."

Tiral waved his hand dismissively. "That is a waste of time. Prime Minister em'Rlakun does nothing without my express orders. She knows nothing I have not told her."

"Perhaps that is so. Nevertheless, I will meet with her tonight in the council chambers." Klag said, "That, Ambassador, would be foolish. It's a security risk for you to beam to tad. All meetings should either take place on the Gorkon or here."

"I appreciate your concern, Captain," Worf said, "however, that is a risk I am willing to take. And I assume Bekk Krevor will accompany me to ensure my safety."

"Ambassador--"

"Are you questioning my decision, Captain?" Worf asked.

Klag started to say

"Yes," but then thought better of it. "You are in command of the mission, Ambassador. If you wish to die a fool's death, that is your right."

Worf turned back to Tiral. "Have you determined the source of the ships the rebels used to attack your satellite last week?"

Tiral nodded. "The rebels had a base on the moon, which we have eliminated. At first, we thought it was their primary headquarters, but that is not the case--they just used it as a place to acquire off planet material. We don't know where they got the ships. They were sublight

skimmers of a type that was very common in this sector thirty years ago. In any case, all lunar operations have been shut down--the mining we did there was of little import--and any vessel approaching the moon is shot on sight."

Speaking of security risks, Klag thought. Still, Tiral's response was the correct one. Not that it did any good.

"I believe that is all," Worf said, standing again.

Tiral began, "I will meet you in the council chambers at--"

"No," Worf. "I will meet with Prime Minister em'Rlakun alone."

Letting out a snort, Tiral said, "If that is what the ambassador wishes, so be it. My guards will, of course, also be present."

"That is not necessary, Governor."

"I disagree. Besides, it is already done. At least two guards are posted in every public room on the planet." Tiral stood and bared his teeth. "These are dangerous times, Ambassador. Attempts on the lives of Klingons have become commonplace. Someone of your rank will be a target the moment you set foot on tad. You do, after all, still appear to be a Klingon."

Klag was not surprised to see Worf let this insult go by. The ambassador simply looked at Klag, who started to rise as well--until Tiral said, "I wish to speak to the captain and commander about other military matters."

Worf hesitated a moment, then simply inclined his head and left the room without a word, Krevor following.

As soon as the doors closed behind them, Tiral turned on Klag, spittle flying from his mouth. "This is your idea of help? A traitor from the Federation? "

"You will modify your tone, Governor," Klag said quietly, "or I will modify it for you. I promised you nothing but a good word with the High Council. I gave you that. The orders on this mission came from Chancellor Martok himself. I fail to see what more you want."

"I want a Klingon to solve this problem, not that petaq who just left my office."

Klag looked at Drex. Worf was, after all, a House-mate of Drex's--but nothing was forthcoming from his first officer. "Ambassador Worf is who you have, Governor. I suggest you make use of him, or risk him going through with his threat."

"You would permit that?"

Klag was starting to wonder if speaking on Tiral's behalf had been such a good idea. "Governor, my orders from the chancellor were to escort the ambassador to tad and obey him for the duration of the mission. I would need a very convincing reason to disobey those orders. I doubt you can give me one. Now then, are there truly military matters to discuss, or was that simply an excuse to whine to me about the ambassador?" Tiral snarled and said, "That is all, Captain. If you will excuse me, I have work to do."

Klag rose and left the room, his guard and Drex following behind.

As they traversed the corridors toward the transporter room, Klag said, "I had expected you to be familiar with the mission profile, Commander."

"I wasn't aware that it was necessary, Captain," Drex said. "I will attend to it upon our return to the Gorkon."

"See that you do," Klag said.

His right arm itched.

As soon as Worf materialized in the transporter chamber on tad, he adjusted the temperature control on his thermal suit to a higher setting. The reports hadn't prepared him for how cold it was here.

A white-furred al'Hmatti technician operated the transporter platform.

Behind him stood two armed Klingons, with another two at the door.

The reports hadn't prepared him for how big the al'Hmatti were, either.

He knew that they were generally taller than Klingons, but he hadn't expected them to so dwarf him. N ever in his adult life had Worf felt as small as he felt in their presence, first on the satellite and now here. It didn't sit well with him.

Another al'Hmatti stood in front of the platform. Although the al'Hmatti did not generally bother with much by way of clothing--their fur, blubber, and metabolism were far more adequate protection from the elements than any textile--this female wore a leather vest decorated with a Klingon emblem over her silver-gray fur.

She made a beeline for Wu. "Greetings," she said, bending low to the human, "and welcome to tad. I'm Prime Minister em'Rlakun. You must be Ambassador Worf."

Worf ground his teeth.

"I'm afraid I mustn't, ma'am, as the real Ambassador Worf might get cross," Wu said, indicating Worf. "This is who you're looking for. I'm merely his aide."

The prime minister's eyes narrowed, and she straightened up. Worf knew from his reading that this was a sign of contrition, but it only served to make her more physically imposing. "Ambassador, please accept my humblest apologies. When I was told that the Federation ambassador was coming to meet with me, I simply assumed--" Quickly, Worf said, "Think nothing of it," his breath condensing in the air.

"If you will follow me, please, Ambassador," she said, "we can get right down to business." With that, em'Rlakun lowered herself onto all fours and loped out of the room through an open entryway. Even at this posture, she came up to Worf's chest.

According to the same files that told Worf of tad's chill and the al'Hmatti's size, the council chambers were like many al'Hmatti structures carved directly out of rock and ice, akin to Earth igloos.

Very few had interior doors. Carpets lined the floors, but the walls of this building were all solid ice. Worf noticed that, as with the satellite, images of Tiral decorated most of the walls. Unlike the satellite, armed Klingon guards were always within sight--but the al'Hmatti who scurried about, performing odd menial functions, didn't even seem to notice those guards.

No wonder most of the Klingons live in orbit, he thought. The temperatures went beyond inhospitable. Heaters were out of the question, since they would adversely affect the building's very structure. The only Klingon-built constructions on the planet were connected to the top aline mines--Worf assumed they, at least, were properly heated.

The prime minister led them around a corner into a large antechamber that had several more images of Tiral on the walls. A Klingon sculpture sat on a pedestal in one corner. Cushions were laid out

around a circular stone slab that Worf assumed was meant to serve as a table. Two comfortable-looking leather chairs had been provided, in deference to the bipeds.

As em'Rlakun lay down on one of the cushions, she said, "Have a seat, please, my Mends."

Worf sat in one of the chairs, with Wu taking the next seat. Krevor took her place next to the two guards who stood at the entryway. Worf had hoped to dismiss the guards so that he could speak to em'Rlakun without every word being reported back to Tiral. Listening devices were not an issue. Worf carried three different con fusers of his own design that should have scrambled any such device in his immediate area. Situated in the Federation emblem on the left lapel of his vest, they had been running since the moment he had beamed onto the Gorkon.

Unfortunately, even if Worf dismissed the guards from the room proper, they would still be able to hear what was being said through the wide entryway. He supposed he would have to live with it.

An old-looking al'Hmatti with ice-white fur entered the room. The prime minister asked, "Is there anything we can get you or your aide to drink, Mr. Ambassador? The serving staff makes a fine chech'tluth."

"Nothing for me," Worf said.

Wu looked at the al'Hmatti servant. "Do you have anything warm?" The servant said, "We have tea." Smiling, Wu said, "If it's Klingon tea, I'm afraid that's fatal to my kind. A raktajino would be nice."

"Of course, sir," the servant said, and loped off on all fours.

Gazing upon Worf with almost jet-black eyes, em'Rlakun said, "I must admit, Mr. Ambassador, I'm a bit--well, confused as to why you wish to see me."

"My task is to solve the ongoing difficulties between your people and Governor Tiral's."

"My people?" The nostrils on em'Rlakun's snout widened and she made an odd hissing noise. Worf realized that this was an al'Hmatti laugh.

"Mr. Ambassador, my people support Governor Tiral. What you need is to solve the problems between all of us and the rebels."

"So you have no way of putting me in contact with the rebels?"

"I wish I did, Mr. Ambassador, I truly wish I did."

The servant returned, this time walking only on his hind legs, carrying a tray with a mug of tea and a glass of raktajino. He handed the latter to Wu, and then placed the tray on the table in reach of em'Rlakun.

Reaching for the tea with one paw, em'Rlakun continued "I just don't understand these rebels, Mr. Ambassador. Our standard of living is so much better than it was before. We owe your people so much."

"My people, in this case, Prime Minister, are not the Klingon Empire."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I am here as a representative of the United Federation of Planets.

Your government made an appeal to the Federation after the Klingon overseers were removed four years ago."

Again, em'Rlakun laughed. "That appeal was made by a governing

body that no longer exists, Mr. Ambassador. I suppose, technically, they were the legitimate ruling body at the time, but Governor Tiral had them all put to death after the empire took over again. And deservedly so-after all the empire has done for us, that type of behavior was just insane. You know, most of the people on this world didn't even want the Klingons gone. Believe me, very few complained when the previous government was toppled. I was more than happy to take over as prime minister afterward, and I was honored that Governor Tiral thought so highly of me."

Worf leaned back in his chair. "Anything would be helpful, Prime Minister. Observations of their movements, perhaps."

"I don't have anything that Governor Tiral doesn't already have, Mr. Ambassador. And believe me, if he had a way of tracking them down, he'd have crushed them by now." Rising up from the cushion, em'Rlakun loped over to Worf on all fours. "I'm sorry I can't be of more help, Mr. Ambassador." Worf stood up. "That is quite all right. This has been an enlightening journey."

Next to nun, Wu stood up--having, Worf noticed, only taken a sip of his roklajino.

"If there's nothing else, I have several matters to attend to--including some tasks for Governor Tiral."

"Of course, Prime Minister," Worf said. "Thank you for your time."

Kurak knew that eating in the mess hall was a mistake the minute she saw Leskit sitting there. But she had been going mad eating in her quarters all the time. She thought that maybe--maybe--she could stand the presence of her shipmates for the duration of a meal. To play it safe, however, she had waited until after the primary shift had eaten, when the mess hall wouldn't be crowded.

However, there was Leskit, halfway through a rokeg blood pie. A decent enough pilot who treated the engines well, Leskit had made

several clumsy attempts to attract her attention, which she had heretofore ignored.

Not that she didn't find him attractive. He was a bit on the old side, but he had a certain charm to him. And she admired a man who wore the trophies of battle around his neck. So few did that anymore--took pride in their work. It was a lost art.

But then, it depended on the work, didn't it?

Naturally, he spoke up as soon as she entered. "Commander! Please, join me--this is fine blood pie, and it would be a travesty not to share it."

"Very well," she said, resigned to sitting across from the pilot.

"It's good to see you out and about during your off duty time." Leskit pushed the plate of pie toward her. "I was starting to think you did nothing but sleep and do your duty."

"I also eat," Kurak said. "But that, like sleeping, I prefer to do in private."

"A pity. I've always felt that both activities were better shared."

Ignoring the implication, Kurak took a bite of pie. To her surprise, it was excellent. She'd never tasted replicated food this good.

Unless ..."Is this handmade?"

"No, simply a fine replication. A tribute to the genius of you and your fine staff." With a growl, Kurak said, "Vail."

"Repulsive little worm, but he has his uses, you have to admit."

"I don't have to admit anything, Lieutenant."

"Please, Kurak, we're off-duty. Call me Leskit."

"I will call you

" Lieutenant," and you will address me as

"Commander," is that understood?"

"So formal, Commander. I'm disappointed."

"Get used to it. Let me put it to you simply I'm not interested. Not in you, nor any other male on this ship."

Leskit smiled. "On behalf of the humble, rejected males of the Gorkon, may I ask why?"

Taking another bite of the blood pie, Kurak said, "Because you're an idiot. You're all idiots."

"All? That's rather general."

"You're in the Defense Force, which proves it right there," she muttered.

Leskit laughed. "I might point out, Commander, that you're in the Defense Force as well."

"Don't remind me. It wasn't my idea."

"Has our esteemed chancellor issued a draft that I'm unaware of?"

Kurak rolled her eyes. "No. My father, however, did. After a fashion."

Leskit raised an eyebrow.

She sighed. "Prior to the war, I was a warp field specialist. It would not be immodest to say I was one o f the best."

"Yes, I understand that you designed the Negh'Var."

Kurak blinked. "I was the main designer, yes. My family did not approve. Both my parents, all four grandparents, and my three brothers were soldiers. I prefer working in a lab to working on a starship, however, and I told them that. Repeatedly."

"I take it the war changed things."

"Wars often do," Kurak said, pausing to take another bite of the pie.

"My father threatened to banish me from our House if I did not enlist.

So I did. I was given a field commission in light of my work in ship design, and I spent the war holding ships together while the Jem'Hadar did then- best to tear them apart."

"But the war is over, Commander. Why stay?"

"My parents, my brothers, my grandparents--they're all dead. I am the only able adult left in our House. I cannot break the tradition now--at

least not until my nephews are old enough to join the Defense Force. The House of Palkar must always serve the empire," she said bitterly, quoting a line that had been drilled into her since birth. "But understand this--I will serve for as long as I must. That is all. You will cease your attempts to befriend or seduce me, and you will leave me alone." She reached for the blood pie, then glowered at it. "And my subordinates will follow my orders."

She stood up and threw the remainder of the pie across the room, narrowly missing a bekk's head.

Then she left the mess hall in search of Vail. She had had quite enough of that Lubbockian slime devil's disobedience

As soon as he walked into his and Wu's quarters, Worf said, "Call up the prime minister's schedule for the last three months. Compare it to the governor's log for the same period. I wish to see how many of the tasks that Tiral has delegated to em'Rlakun have actually been performed."

Wu nodded. "Of course."

To Worf's surprise, Krevor, standing in the still-open doorway, spoke.

"Why investigate them?"

Worf regarded her. "An interesting question. Do you think I should not, Bekk?"

Krevor quickly stood at full attention. "My apologies, sir. I spoke out of turn."

"You did not answer my question. Please, come in and speak freely."

With only a hint of hesitation, Krevor entered the room, the door closing behind her. "Prime Minister em'Rlakun is obviously loyal to the empire. As is Governor Tiral."

"So you feel that my investigating them is disloyal?"

"I didn't say that, sir."

"No, but you did think it." Holding up a hand to stave off Krevor's protest, Worf added, "It is all right, Bekk. Your confusion is understandable. Prime Minister em'Rlakun does appear to be loyal. But appearances are deceiving, and I believe that she was lying to us--both regarding her loyalty, and regarding her knowledge of the rebels. I wish to confirm my suspicions."

"I have something, Mr. Ambassador." Wu held up his padd. "It'll take a while to do a complete search, of course, but the governor did specifically request three months ago that the prime minister put a stop to all seditious publications. The governor, in fact, made it the parliament's top priority." He handed Worf the padd. "Since that time, the number of seditious publications has risen. Dramatically.

Now, admittedly, that could just be due to incompetence on the prime minister's part ..."

Gazing at the padd, Worf said, "Perhaps. But I doubt it. Keep searching. Meanwhile, I will investigate those rebel movement reports that em'Rlakun claimed did not help her or Tiral."

"May I be of service, sir?" Krevor asked.

Worf looked at the guard. He was tempted to make use of her--but he wasn't sure he could trust her any more than he could Tiral's guards.

Klag had made his disdain for Worf quite clear, and Krevor could be

one of his agents.

"That is not necessary. You may return to your station."

Krevor nodded, and took her position outside.

Chapter Five.

"WHY is it that every time I see you, brother, you're eating something?"

Kori laughed at the image of his brother Larok, an action that caused him to spit some of his stewed bok-rat liver onto the viewscreen.

Wiping the food away with his hand didn't help--it left a liver stain right on Larok's wide forehead and the right half of his brown mane.

"Bad timing, brother."

"No, I think it's just that you're always eating. Have nothing better to do on that freezer unit of a planet?"

Again, Kori laughed. "The planet's called tad. Since you're patrolling this sector, Captain, you should know that."

It was rare that Kori got to speak in real time with his older sibling.

But Captain Larok of the I. K S. Sompek was in this sector, so instant communication was possible for a change. Since Kori had gotten the job on tad at the top aline refinery, his contact with family was

sporadic.

Mostly, that was how he liked it.

"Of course, my heartfelt apologies, brother," Larok said with a small laugh. "Oh, you'll be happy to know that Command finally saw fit to send me a new gunner. She's quite a woman. You'd like her--she has hair the color of flames."

Kori leaned forward. "Sounds nice. I don't suppose you could come here and introduce me to her?"

"And risk incurring the wrath of the Hero of Marcan and the son of Martok? Not even for your libido would I do that, Kori." Frowning, Kori asked, "Martok's the new chancellor, right?"

Larok shook his head. "Sometimes, brother, I despair of you."

"I just don't follow politics." Kori shrugged. "Mine is a simple existence I wake up, Grul yells at me, I yell at the al'Hmatti, and at the end of the day, we've refined more top aline and I go to sleep."

"And no doubt you

"II die in your sleep." Larok sneered as he spoke.

"If Father were alive today ..."

"But he isn't, is he? He died a glorious death fighting the Romulans.

Mother died a glorious death fighting the Cardassians, and our dear sister died a glorious death fighting the Jem'Hadar. I'm sure you'll get your glorious death soon enough. And I'll be right here, eating my bok

rat liver and living happily on."

"You'll suffer in Gre'thor, brother, and your life of leisure has not prepared you for living amongst the dishonored dead. We, however--"

"I know, I know," Kori interrupted, "you'll all be in Sto-Vo-Kor. The sad thing is, you really believe that."

Larok's face darkened, and he started to speak. Then he took a breath and let out another laugh. "Must we always have this argument?"

Kori shook his head. "Apparently, we must." A light on his console beeped. "I'm afraid I must go, brother. Duty calls."

"As does mine."

"And I still think you should stop by here and introduce me to that redheaded gunner of yours."

"Perhaps after the Gorkon has departed, if we're still in the sector."

"Your generosity, brother, is overwhelming. Screen off."

Larok's laughing face faded from the screen, leaving only the liver stain.

Stuffing the last of the liver into his mouth, Kori called up a status report to see why the alarm had lit. It turned out to be a minor problem with the load from the southern tap.

Thumbing the intercom, he said, "Ge'Tvrona."

An angular al'Hmarti face appeared on the screen. "Yes, Kori? What's so funny?"

The liver stain obscured ge'Tvrona's right eye, and Kori found it highly amusing for some reason. "Nothing," he said quickly, forcing a serious expression onto his face. He was a supervisor, after all.

"There's some sort of problem with the load from the southern tap. It's not going through the processor properly. See what the problem is. We haven't been late with a shipment yet; I don't want to start now."

"Of course."

"And when you're done, stop by my office. The shift ends in an hour, and I could use some help with this last bottle of blood wine

Ge'Tvrona bared his teeth. "Excellent! I look forward to it!"

"Screen off."

Kori leaned back in his comfortable chair and rested his hands on his ample belly. It'll be good to share some blood wine with ge'Tvrona.

Kori liked the al'Hmatti who worked for him, and they liked him. All in all, they weren't bad, for jeghpu'wl'.

He gazed around the tiny office that barely fit his corpulent form, the console, and the chair he sat in. It may have been small, but dammit, it was his office. And he was content. Let Lorak get himself killed out there in space in the mistaken belief that there'd be a reward at the end. Dead was dead, as far as Kori was concerned. He'd rather sit here and drink blood wine with his friends.

Another alarm went off. He checked his console, but nothing was

indicated. Then he realized that it was the red light over the door.

Kori had never seen that. light go off, and it took him a few moments to remember that it meant an intruder alert.

Why would we have intruders here? We're a refinery on the hind end of an ice planet that nobody gives a targ's hoof about.

Of course, there were all those reports about rebel activity that Supervisor Grul kept yelling at him to read. suppose I should read them at some point, but why bother? It's not as if it affects me directly.

Leaning forward in his chair, Kori went through the computer to find the procedure for what to do in case of an intruder alert.

Then he heard disrupter blasts.

At least, Kori assumed they were disrupter blasts. They certainly sounded like a blaster of some sort, but Kori didn't recognize it.

Since Kori knew every sound that every piece of machinery in the refinery made, he knew it wasn't just one of the lasers malfunctioning.

This is bad.

Suddenly, the viewscreen lit up again, this time with Takus's fa ce.

Takus was the chief engineer, and the calmest person Kori had ever met.

So the look of panic on his face rather surprised him.

"There is a bomb in the refinery, repeat, there is a bomb in the refinery! Grab a weapon and abandon the refinery--and if you see any rebel scum, shoot them on sight!"

"Rebel scum?" Kori cried, but Takus wasn't on a two way channel.

"Kiln and I are going to try to disarm it. Everyone else, get out of here--but take as many of those rebels as you can!"

"Why are rebels attacking us?" Kori asked, but Takus's face had already faded. Not that he would have answered in any case.

The power went out in the office. Since the office had no windows, the room was now plunged into pitch darkness. Kori hated the dark, and felt a panic well up inside him.

The green emergency lights went on after a moment, alleviating the panic.

But he was still frightened.

Calm down, he told himself. What would Larok do?

He thought a moment. Exactly what he was told grab a weapon and abandon the refinery.

Kori reached under the chair and grabbed the disrupter that Grul had made him keep there. Then he went to the door, opened the panel next to it, and pulled the emergency lever. The door obligingly slid open.

The corridor, like his office, was bathed in dim green light. It had been years since Kori had actually fired a disrupter, and the weapon's

weight felt odd in his hand. He would have preferred to be holding one of his blood wine bottles.

Panic started to overtake him again when he realized that, if the bomb went off, he'd lose his blood wine He'd spent a fortune on it ... Stop it, he admonished himself again. Just get out of here. Worry about the rest of it later.

Turning a corner, he heard a roar. He whirled to see an al'Hmatti leaping at him. Crying out in panic, he fired his disruptor--and absolutely nothing happened.

The al'Hmatti collided with him, and they both fell to the floor. Kori couldn't breathe, as the impact had knocked the wind out of him.

Whoever this al'Hmatti was, Kori didn't recognize him. True, most of them looked more or less alike to him, but he'd never met one with the fur on its cheek shaved like that.

It climbed up onto all fours, straddling Kori. "Time to die, Klingon," it said.

Then it spasmed, glowed a dark red color, and fell on top of Kori.

The impact of its dead weight was, if anything, worse than when it attacked. "Get this thing off me!" he cried. He hoped that the person who had shot the al'Hmatti--he was pretty sure that red glow was from a disruptor blast, though the green light made it seem darker than usual could hear him. He didn't have sufficient breath to yell again.

After a moment, when Kori was convinced he'd be trapped under this damn creature forever, someone rolled the dead al'Hmatti off his stomach.

"Kori," said the Klingon who now stood over nun. It was one of the

new security guards that the governor had appointed--Kori couldn't remember his name. "I should have known." The guard picked up Kori's disrupter and examined it. "This is out of power, you todsah!"

No wonder it didn't work, Kori thought, yanking the disrupter out of the guard's hands. He looked down at the al'Hmatti corpse. "I've lived on this planet for a year, but I never appreciated how big they are before."

"I'll escort you out. Move!" The guard didn't sound pleased with the idea, but Kori was relieved. He didn't relish facing crazed al'Hmatti armed only with a useless disrupter.

They ran through the corridors, Kori trying to keep up with the thinner, younger guard.

"Hurry up, you fat fool," the guard said, "or I'll leave you behind."

"Hey, you're supposed to do this kind of thing. I'm supposed to sit in an office."

"And eat all the bok-rat liver you can find," the guard said, spitting disdainfully. "You make me ill."

They turned a corner to see another al'Hmatti. "Die, rebel!" the guard said, but Kori recognized the al'Hmatti as ge'Tvrona.

He said, "No, don't shoot! He's all right, he works here, he's a friend."

"A friend? He's jeghpu'wl'." But the guard did lower his disrupter.

Getvrona loped toward them on all fours. "What's going on, Kori?"

"Some rebels are attacking. They put a bomb somewhere. Takus and Kiln are trying to disarm it now. We've got to get out of here."

"Damn," ge'Tvrona said.

Then he turned and mauled the guard, slicing his throat open with a quick slash.

Kori stood in shock as the guard fell to the ground, blood pouring from his neck. The guard tried to get off a disrupter shot, but it fired harmlessly into the ceiling.

"Ge'Tvrona, what're you doing?"

"Killing a Klingon. It seems to be the only way to get rid of you."

There was a harshness to ge'Tvrona's voice that Kori had never heard before.

"I don't understand."

"Of course not. You've never understood us. You just rape our planet."

"I--ge'Tvrona, I thought we were friends!"

"Friends?" Ge'Tvrona let out a nasty laugh. "I'mjeghpu'wl'." Then ge'Tvrona grabbed the guard's disrupter, stood on his hind legs, and shot Kori.

Every nerve in Kori's body felt like it was set on fire.

Then he felt nothing. He knew he had collapsed to the ground because

now all he could see was the green-tinged ceiling, but he felt no impact. The green light started to fade to black.

"Oh, and one more thing," a distant voice that must have been ge'Tvrona's said. "I'm afraid the shipment's going to be late." A laugh followed. Then "This is ge'Tvrona. The Klingons are trying to disarm the bomb. You'd better send someone down there."

Kori heard nothing after that.

After a moment, he saw nothing. The faint ozone smell that always lingered in the refinery faded, as did the scent of the guard's blood.

Even the taste of the bok-rat liver faded from his tongue. His last thought was hope I was wrong about the afterlife.

Tiral paced agitatedly around Klag's office on the I

Gorkon as Worf gave the governor and the captain a report of the meeting with em'Rlakun and the follow-up I research he and Wu had done. Actually, it was more of a waddle than a pace, given Tiral's girth. Also present was one of Tiral's guards--Klag had asked that he remain outside with Krevor and Klag's own guard, but Tiral had insisted that the guard had to be in the same room with him any time he left the confines of the satellite. To Worf's relief, Klag had at least convinced Tiral to order the guard to holster his disrupter. As Worf suspected, the prime minister had performed very few of the tasks Tiral had assigned her that directly related to dealing with the rebels. Worf handed Tiral the padd on which Wu had compiled the report. Tiral glanced at it, then snarled and threw it across the room. Worf had anticipated this action, which was why he had transferred the report to one of the Gorkon's pad ds

"She will die immediately," Tiral said. "That would be unwise," said Worf. "Then the rebels I will know we are on to them, and they will go deeper into hiding. As it is, there has been no rebel activity since the Gorkon's arrival yesterday."

"It could be a coincidence," Tiral said.

"Possibly. But it is more likely that they are keeping a low profile as long as the Defense Force has an official presence here--and they would not wish to create a bad impression on the very Federation representative they have asked for. But as long as they think that we do not know of their inside person, they will believe they have an advantage. And they have quite a large one, as it is."

Klag frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I have studied the reports the governor's security staff made regarding rebel activity. The rebels have been surprisingly successful, and the governor has had great difficulty in capturing any of them." Glaring at the governor, Klag said, "Perhaps that can be attributed to poor management."

"Watch your tone, Captain," Tiral said.

"My tone?" Klag stood up from his desk. "When I first arrived here last week, Governor, you were more than happy to blame the High Council for your misfortunes. Since I came back, however, it seems to me that most of the blame can be laid at your feet."

Worf stepped in. "The answer to why the rebels are so successful cannot be found so simply, Captain. No one is capable of that level of incompetence." Both men looked inquisitively at Worf. "As I said, I have studied the reports. The rebels have appeared seemingly out of nowhere and returned there when they were finished. There is no evidence of any kind of transporting technology at work--all sensor scans have turned up negative. While it is true that the governor's security force is made up primarily of Defense Force rejects and cowards, they are generally capable of reading a simple scanner."

Tiral cursed. "I should have known. I appealed to your sense of honor,

Captain. Instead, I get lies, insults, and slander against my staff!"

"If I commit slander, Governor," Worf said, walking over to pick up the padd Tiral had thrown, "then so do you. I merely quoted your last report to the High Council."

Worf thumbed the padd over to the appropriate report and handed it to Tiral. The governor regarded the padd's screen, and his own words, angrily.

Klag sat back down at his desk. "Since you say that putting the prime minister to death is unwise, Ambassador, I assume you have an alternative? Beyond simply leaving her alive so as not to alert the rebels, that is."

"Yes." Worf took the padd back from the scowling Tiral. "I suggest that Commander Drex be assigned temporarily to Governor Tiral, in order to aid him in putting the rebels down. It will not raise suspicions among the rebels, as it is the sort of assignment one might expect."

Tiral lumbered toward the door. "I expect Commander Drex to report to my office within the hour," he said, and then left, the guard following on his heels.

As soon as the door closed, Worf said, "Drex's true function will be to locate the rebel base. In addition, I will require Lieutenant Toq's services."

"Is the Gorkon your ship now, Ambassador?" Klag said snidely.

"Need I remind you that I command this mission, Captain?"

"You keep insisting on doing so."

"You keep giving me reason."

Klag stared at Worf for a moment, then finally said, "Why Drex?"

"Is there any reason why I should not have chosen him? He is, after all, first officer of this vessel, and should therefore be more than capable of handling this duty."

"In an ideal galaxy, that would be the case, Ambassador."

"Meaning?" Worf prompted.

Klag rose from his chair. "You know what I mean! Drex is first officer of this vessel due to his family, not his qualifications--a method of advancement you should be intimately familiar with, son of Mogh. Or should that be ' of Martok' now? After all, you do enjoy the benefits of being part of his House far more than you did from being the son of a forgotten warrior three decades dead."

Worf snorted. "Benefits? Since boarding this vessel, Captain, I have endured slights and insults from you, and a constant flaunting of my authority, though you have been careful to stop short of undermining it. You seem to be doing this solely out of a misbegotten belief that I owe a position granted me by the Federation Council and Starfleet Command to the chancellor of an allied empire. I fail to see how that benefits me."

Walking around his desk to face Worf directly, Klag said, "You expect me to believe that your being part of Martok's House had nothing to do with your appointment?"

"What I expect, Captain, is for you to follow my orders for the duration of this mission. For me to expect anything else would be--optimistic."

With that, Worf turned to leave the captain's office. As the doors parted, he turned back around to face Klag. "One other thing, Captain."

"Yes?" Klag said.

"If you ever speak ill of my father again, I will kill you." Klag actually smiled. "If I ever speak ill of your father again, Ambassador, I welcome you to make the attempt."

Worf inclined his head and left, heading straight for the bridge.

He entered to see Drex standing in front of the command chair. Alert lights flashed, but did not give off noise; Drex was obviously running a battle drill.

"Shields!" the first officer yelled, sparing a quick glance at the door to see that Worf had entered. Drex then turned back to the viewscreen, ignoring the ambassador.

"At maximum," Rodek said.

"Ready disrupters."

"Locked on target."

"Fire!" Rodek a button on his console.

"Direct hit," Toq said. "Enemy shields at thirty percent."

"Another spread, gunner," Drex said.

"Aye, sir," Rodek said, then added "They're firing on us."

"Evasive!"

"If you insist," Leskit said, entering commands into his own console, "but it won't help."

The lights dimmed to mimic the impact of the enemy fire. "Return fire, gunner! Operations, damage report!"

Toq gazed at his console. "Shields at seventy-five percent. Minor damage to secondary hull."

"Enemy taking evasive action, Warp 7," Rodek said. "Disruptors missed."

"Pursue and overtake, pilot, Warp 9."

Leskit manipulated his console in uncharacteristic silence, though, of course, Worf did not feel any change in the ship around him--it was simulated warp speed, after all.

"In weapons range now, Commander," Toq said.

"Lock quantum torpedoes and fire, gunner," Drex said.

"Firing," Rodek said. "Direct hit. Enemy destroyed, sir."

As always, Rodek sounded like he was giving a report on gaseous anomalies. The rest of the bridge crew, however, cheered. Worf was not sure why. As battle drills went, this was singularly uninspired.

"Stand down from drill," Drex said. The alert lights stopped blinking at the command. Then Drex tamed to Worf. "What do you want?"

"I wish to speak to you and Lieutenant Toq in my quarters when you are off shift. I have an assignment for each of you."

"Really?" Drex said with a sneer.

"Really," Worf replied with unconcealed annoyance. "I will see you in my quarters when the shift ends. Do not be late."

Drex was late.

Toq arrived right on time, saying that Drex would be along "shortly."

Worf was not entirely displeased, as he hadn't gotten the chance to talk to Toq since beaming aboard.

Worf had first encountered the young man in the Car raya system. Worf had heard that there might be living victims of the Khitomer massacre--to which Worf had thought himself and his nurse the only survivors--in a Romulan prison camp in that system. Mogh, Worf's father, was rumored to be one of them. When he arrived, Worf had discovered that the rumors were partly true several survivors of Khitomer had been taken into Romulan space and lived on the planet, in peace, with the Romulans who had taken them prisoner--though Mogh was not among them. Worf's father had truly died at Khitomer, as Worf had long believed. They had even raised families--in one case, the Romulan overseer had married a Klingon woman, and had a daughter.

But the Klingon children that had been raised on Car raya knew nothing of their heritage--until Worf, at this point trapped in their prison, started to teach it to them. Toq had been one of those children.

Reluctantly, the Romulans had agreed to let Worf take the children who wished to leave back to the empire, on the condition that none of them reveal the truth about Carraya. Worf had created a cover story--that they had been the only survivors of a vessel that had crashed several years earlier-and had helped them reintegrate into Klingon society.

Now Toq, whom Worf had not seen since bringing the young man aboard the Enterprise, regaled him with tales of his exploits since joining the Defense Force, ending with his advancement to second officer of the Gorkon by challenging and defeating Lieutenant Kegren.

Just as he finished the tale of his promotion, the door chime went off.

"Enter," Worf said.

Drex came in.

"You are late," Worf said.

"I am first officer of this ship, Ambassador. Other duties commanded my attention."

"Those duties will have to wait. From this point forward, you will be detached to Governor Tiral's service." Worf quickly explained about Prime Minister em'Rlakun. "As far as the governor is concerned, you are simply aiding him. However, your true purpose will be to discover the whereabouts of the rebel base. Assuming, of course," he added, "that you are up to such a task."

Drex growled. The first time Worf had heard that growl at Quark's bar on Deep Space Nine, Worf had been less than impressed. It hadn't unproved with age. He sounded more like a shuttle with engine trouble than a warrior expressing displeasure.

"If you do not think me capable, Ambassador--"

"What I think does not matter. Anyone less than the first officer would be construed as an insult by Governor Tiral. Appearances must be maintained, so I have been forced to settle for you. You will report to the governor's satellite immediately."

Snorting, Drex turned and left Worf's quarters.

have done what I can, Martok, Worf thought to his House head. Either Drex will excel in this task--to spite me, if for no other reason--or he will fail and prove his worthlessness. I hope for your sake that it will be the former.

"What of me?" Toq asked.

"I need you to search through unclaimed and Federation space in this sector for a planet similar to tad."

Toq frowned. "May I ask why, sir?" he asked.

"It may be necessary to relocate some or all of the al'Hmatti. I need to know if that is a viable option. Limit the search to locations no more than two weeks away at Warp 6." That was the most they could expect out of a Starfleet colonization ship--huge vessels equipped to move vast numbers of people.

"Very well," Toq said. He sounded as if he wanted to ask why that was considered any kind of option--it was not a very Klingon solution--but

he refrained from doing so. At least Toq understands the chain of command, Worf thought sourly.

Relocation was not an ideal solution, and Worf-remembering his recent mission on the Enterprise to the Bak'u planet--certainly would only pursue it if the al'Hmatti themselves agreed. But before he could even propose it to them, he needed Toq to determine if it was even feasible.

As Toq left, Wu entered. "Mr. Ambassador, we have a bit of a problem.

The rebels just attacked a top aline refinery."

Chapter Six.

Worf observed the wreckage of a top aline refinery through the viewscreen of Governor Tkal's shuttle. Most of the roof of the massive, rectangular structure was gone, exposing the inside to the elements. Green emergency lights still lit parts of it, illuminating the shattered machinery that lay strewn about those floors that remained intact--a large hole had been made through three levels. Worf saw al'Hmatti workers scurrying back and forth trying to survey and repair the damage, many at the direction of thermal-suit-wearing Klingons. Several other shuttles flew in and out of the area, evacuating injured personnel and bringing in repair crews.

"What was it you said, Ambassador?" Tlral said angrily. "That the rebels were keeping a low profile because you and the Gorkon had arrived?"

"That was speculation on my part," Worf said calmly. "Obviously, that speculation was erroneous."

"Obviously," Tiral said.

Worf, Drex, and Krevor had beamed over to the governor's satellite as soon as Wu had advised them of the attack. On their arrival, Drex had commenced his new duties as Tiral's temporary aide, and Worf and Krevor accompanied the governor to survey the destroyed refinery. Tiral saw no reason for the ambassador to go, but Worf insisted.

Worf was getting tired of having to insist every time he gave an order.

The shuttle pilot said, "Lord Governor, I have Supervisor Grul."

Tiral nodded. "On screen."

The visage of an older woman appeared on a small screen to the right of the flight console. For the first time since Worf had met him, Tiral's pudgy face softened. "What happened, Grul?"

"What in Kahless's name do you think happened, you stupid petaq? Damned rebels is what happened. Did they take your brains when they made you governor?" She looked at Worf, standing next to Tiral. "Who's that?"

"This is Worf, the Federation ambassador. This is what the High Council finally sent in reply to my calls for help."

Grul snorted. "About time the Federation showed some sense and got another Klingon to be ambassador. Well, let me tell you what will solve the problem, boy-crush the damned rebels."

"One cannot crush what cannot be found," Worf said neutrally.

"Yeah, well, wish I could help you there."

"What happened, Grul?" Tiral asked again.

"They came out of nowhere. One minute we're processing the latest batch from the southern tap, the next there's a bunch of al'Hmatti with shaved cheeks all over the place. No warning, no alarms, nothing until after they were deep inside. One of them planted a bomb. Kiln and Takus tried to disarm the thing, but they couldn't do it. And if those two couldn't, nobody could." She sighed. "Now they never will."

Tiral growled. "They died well, at least."

Grul waved her right arm in a dismissive gesture. "Bah. They're probably already in Sto-Vo-Kor, getting drunk."

Worf scowled. "And there was no sign of how they penetrated your security, nor where they went after they planted the bomb?"

"That's what I meant when I said, "They came out of nowhere, "boy Grul snapped.

Letting the comment go, Worf asked, "Any prisoners?"

"None breathing. They killed four others, too--three guards and one of my supervisors. Good people. Not how they should've died."

"Were any al'Hmatti killed or injured?"

Grul snorted. "Does it matter?"

"Yes. How many?"

" A couple were injured when the bomb went off. But the only

fatalities or major injuries we've found so far were Klingons," Grul said bitterly.

Tiral nodded. "There's a Defense Force commander named Drex at the satellite. He's helping me out for the time being. Send your report to him."

"Fine. Can I get back to work now? "

"Of course, Grul, thank you. I'll check back later. Tiral out."

The screen went blank.

"She raised me," Tiral said suddenly. "My parents were killed at Narendra I'll. She was my nursemaid. When I was appointed governor, I put her in charge of the refinery. She is the main reason why top aline production has increased since I took over here. If the rebels had killed her ..." Tiral closed his gray eyes for a moment, then opened them and stared straight at Worf. "You had best accomplish your mission with dispatch, Ambassador." He turned to the pilot. "Bring us to the capital. I wish to announce the next round of executions."

"That would be foolish," Worf said.

Whirling, Tiral said, "I suspected you would be squeamish about this kind of thing, Ambassador. After all, you were raised by humans." He spat the word out as if it were chilled blood wine "If you wish to spare your stomachs, you can return to the satellite. There's a transporter right behind you."

"You misunderstand," Worf said coldly. "I am not human. I fully comprehend the laws regarding the treatment of jeghpu'wl', including the policy of random executions to keep them in line. My objections are not moral, but tactical."

Tiral gave Worf a questioning look. "What?"

"Using random executions against sedition will either deter it or encourage it--allow it to be used as a rallying cry. It should be obvious to you by now which is the case here."

"It is policy--" Tiral started.

"Governor, have you ever read any of the publications you instructed em'Rlakun to suppress?"

"No. Why should I?"

"Because when fighting a battle it is generally wise to know your enemy." He pulled a padd out of a pocket in his thermal suit, and thumbed through several displays to the one he wanted. Handing it to Tiral, he said, "The rebels have been using the executions as a propaganda tool against you and the empire."

As Tiral read the display, his mouth twisted into a vicious snarl.

"Damn them!"

"It may be policy to kill random citizens in response to this bombing.

But it will also aid your enemy's cause and weaken yours. That is a poor position to take."

Tiral handed the padd back to Worf. "Very well," he said, nearly choking on the words. He turned to the pilot. "Return us to the satellite. There is nothing more we can do here."

Tiral didn't even look at Worf for the rest of the journey, which suited

Worf fine. He had much to ponder.

Something is wrong, he thought. It does not make sense for the rebels to make such a high-profile move when they are finally getting what they want. The symbolism of the attack was as important in this case as the attack itself. The slowdown in top aline production mattered less than the fact that they had damaged a major refinery a symbol of the empire's presence. After all, the Klingons would never have come here in the first place if not for the top aline

But they know that I am here to negotiate a peace at their request, he thought. So why continue with the assaults?

Perhaps the rebels were factionalized--the group that had advocated contacting the Federation differed from the group that had attacked the refinery. That would be unfortunate.

However, aside from their ill-fated assault on Tiral's satellite--the fight that the Gorkon finished off--the rebels' campaigns had been fairly successful and well organized. That, in turn, bespoke an organized group.

So why continue? What has changed?

And then, in a sudden moment of clarity, he saw it. It was obvious, really.

Worf almost smiled.

As soon as the shuttle docked at the satellite, Worf disembarked and headed for command-in-control, Krevor silently on his heels. Drex was at the workstation Tiral had assigned him.

"What do you want?" Drex asked at Worf's approach.

"You should shortly be receiving a report from a Supervisor Grul about the refinery attack. Study it carefully. I want to know how the rebels got in and out. However they did so, they used a tactic undetectable by Tiral's people."

Drex glowered at Worf. "And you expect me to find what the governor could not?"

"I expect you to follow my orders, Commander."

"Yes, sir. Anything else?"

"No. Carry on."

Martok, if Drex does not find his own honor soon, House-mate or not, I will have to kill him.

Wu was waiting in the Gorkon's transporter room when Worf and Krevor materialized in a red glow several minutes later. "Report," Worf said as he stepped off the platform and moved toward the exit.

Reading off his padd as he and Krevor followed the ambassador, Wu said, "You've received a few correspondences. Nothing major, but a couple regard matters you'll need to deal with once we get back to Qo'nos, so you may want to look them over. Also, Lieutenant Toq has found only one suitable world to match your search. It's located outside Klingon space--the only planet surrounding a blue giant. Like tad, it's mostly covered in ice over a saline sea. There was an archaeological survey done about ten years ago--the natives called it Koosbane, apparently, before they died out about seven million years ago."

"How far?"

"A week at Warp 6."

Worf nodded. That was something. "Compose a message to Minister T'Latrek. Suggest to her the possibility of the Federation relocating the arhmatti."

"To Koosbane?"

"Yes."

"Very well."

"Let me see the message before you have it sent," Worf said as they arrived at their quarters. Krevor took up her position outside while Wu and Worf entered.

Wu made some notes on his padd, then said, "Also, I finished compiling the report on Kreel raids in this sector. There have been four attacks on Klingon ships in this area in the last six months."

"Any commonalities?"

"Rather a big one, actually. Every single vessel they attacked, including this one, had either visited this star system or had it on their itinerary before they were attacked."

Worf looked up sharply at Wu.

"Quite a coincidence, eh, sir?" Wu drawled.

"Hardly," Worf rumbled.

Evidently, realizing his sarcasm was ill-timed, Wu cleared his throat and continued "The encounter with the Gorkon was the first time the Kreel had the added defensive capability of the Breen shields, but the other three were freighters and cargo vessels that couldn't put up quite the same fight that we did."

Worf nodded. "Very well. Have you sent the report to Starfleet Intelligence on the Kreel yet?"

"Not yet. Commander Kurak is supposed to give me comm access later today."

"Good. Add this information to that report. Commander Drex should be sending a report on the refinery raid. I want to see it the moment it is ready."

"Of course. Is there anything else?"

Feeling his stomachs growl, Worf realized he hadn't eaten anything all day. With an internal smile, he thought, Mother woul d be aghast.

"Fetch me some food from the galley. I will be catching up on those correspondences."

"Very good, sir."

Kurak headed to her quarters at the end of her shift in an even worse mood than usual. Lieutenant M'Rep had misaligned the warp coils during the last maintenance cycle and had nearly blown up the ship. She had killed M'Rep for his incompetence herself, which was responsible for worsening her mood--it would take weeks for Command to send a replacement.

Then that imbecile human came mewling after communications access. She was in no mood to deal with one of his kind, so she sent

him off with some excuse or other.

Vail, at least, had been less irritating. He did what he was told--he had fixed M'Rep's mistake in much less time than it would have taken the late engineer to do the job right the first time--and made no suggestions for improvement. Obviously, she thought, my threats had an impact.

Now she just wanted to sleep.

So she was particularly unreceptive to the dead lingta lying across her threshold.

Long ago, the men of her province on Qo'nos would leave a game animal of some kind on the threshold of a woman they wanted to court. No one had indulged in the ludicrous practice in generations.

A padd lay on top of the deceased animal. Its screen glowed with what appeared to be verse.

To her horror, she realized it was a love poem.

Leskit, she thought, it has to be. It seems he won't take "keep away from me" for an answer.

Then she read the poem.

' arlogh nga'chuq Leskit Qongdaqdaq je' Leskit

Kurak Leskit nitebha'

Leskit malrachal ngech tagh nga'chuq yiq nga'chuq

' arlogh

Do'Ha' Leskit lo'lahbe'ghach Leskit

Kurak couldn't help herself. She laughed.

She laughed long and hard. It was probably the worst piece of poetry ever written in all of Klingon history.

"Now that was what I was hoping for."

Kurak whirled to see Leskit standing in the hallway.

"Did you write this drivel?" she asked, trying to get her laughter under control and only partly succeeding.

"No," Leskit said with a smile. "My son wrote it."

"Your son? And his mother ... 7'

"Does not speak to me if she can possibly avoid it. But my son does, as often as he can. He's two, and there's a three-year-old he wants desperately to impress. Sadly, being two, he can't even wrestle a glob fly, much less a proper animal, so he has to settle for poetry."

Kurak held up the padd. "If this is what he's settling for, he's in deep trouble. This isn't even literate."

"I know. I can only hope that he'll learn to spell--or learn to hunt, so he won't have to spell."

"Speaking of hunting, I wasn't aware that there were wild lingta on the Gorkon."

Leskit laughed. "I'm afraid you have your assistant to blame for that one. But I did order him to replicate the beast. It was the only way to get him to do it, as he expected you to react badly." He considered. "You could still say I defeated a foe in order to lay this offering at your feet."

"This was an insane gesture, Lieutenant."

"It's an insane universe, Commander. Besides, it did what it was supposed to do."

"Make a horrible stench in my quarters?"

Again, Leskit laughed. "No, keep you in your doorway while you read the poem, so the door would stay open and I could savor your laughter.

You have a beautiful laugh, Kurak. You should employ it more often."

"I seem to recall, Lieutenant, telling you that you would cease your attempts to befriend or seduce me."

Leskit grinned. "You did say something like that. As predictions go, I thought it fairly poor."

Kurak took Leskit in. He was definitely attractive. He smelted of sweat and grime. The presence of neck bones that Leskit had himself removed from Cardassian corpses sent a thrill through her. She even imagined that he had slain the lingta himself.

She looked into his eyes. "I don't know whether to kill you now or

make you dispose of the lingta first."

"Dispose? And waste a perfectly good piece of meat? With your assistant's facility for replicating food, it would make a glorious meal."

"It would if lingta didn't make me ill," Kurak said.

"Ah." Leskit unholstered his hand disrupter, aimed, and fired. The lingta disintegrated in a red glow. "Problem solved, then. I believe this is the part where you kill me."

Kurak walked inside her quarters. "Perhaps later." She turned around.

Leskit still stood in the doorway. "Don't just stand there, Lieutenant, come in. A man who disposes of a lingta on the threshold deserves at least a drink."

Leskit grinned, bolstered his disrupter, and entered. The door behind him ground shut.

What are you doing, Kurak? she asked herself. You swore you wouldn't get involved with anyone. Serve until your nephews get old enough then get as far away from the Defense Force as possible. Form no attachments, make no impression, simply serve and get out.

But then she thought about how long it had been since she had laughed.

She asked the replicator for a pitcher of chech'tluth and two mugs.

Klag killed the last Jem'Hadar soldier with his mek'leth and screamed to the heavens.

Or, in this case, to the ceiling of the Gorkon's holodeck.

Defense Force vessels had only recently been equipped with holodecks.

But where Starfleet used them for a multitude of recreational and professional purposes, and the Ferengi used them for that race's two favorite pastimes, profit and sex, the Defense Force employed them solely for military training.

Of course, technically, Klag wasn't reliving the Battle of Marcan V as a military exercise. He was reliving it because he enjoyed it, and because he was in a bad mood and needed cheering up.

He was the captain. He could do that.

Right now, he really needed to kill something.

And what better way than by reliving his greatest battle?

"Computer," he said, "restart program."

He stood once again on the arid plains of Marcan V, near the wreckage of the Pagh. He did not need a scanner to know precisely where he would find the crashed Jem'Hadar ship.

Klag was not happy. He was a hero of the empire. He had been fortunate enough to receive a top-of-the-line ship for his first command--a rarity for a newly promoted captain--due in part to his heroism, in part to the shortage of captains, postwar. Soon, he would be inducted into the Order of the Bat'leth.

But he was making a targ's ear of his first mission.

A Jem'Hadar materialized six feet to Klag's left, charging toward him.

With a slash of his mek'leth, Klag cut the creature's supply of the addictive ketracel-white drug and slit its throat.

It had all seemed so reasonable. After all, jeghpu'wl' were attacking on tad. Governor Tiral had no support. It was an intolerable situation, but the governor seemed powerless to do anything about it. Klag had thought he could.

Two Jem'Hadar charged at him. Klag took one down, but the other knocked him to the ground, driving the mek'leth from Klag's hand.

However, Klag was starting to wonder how much of tad's difficulties were truly due to High Council recalcitrance, and how much was the fat governor's own damn fault. The captain began to believe that Worf's accusation of gubernatorial incompetence was completely accurate.

Klag unholstered his hand disrupter and fired on the Jem'Hadar. It disintegrated in a red glow.

Then there was Worf. For Klag to have his command undermined by that--that What is he, really? Klag asked himself. He claims that he got his position legitimately, not as a member of the chancellor's House. Riker claimed the same. But Riker is human, and Worf was raised by humans. Can they truly be trusted?

He picked up his mek'leth and killed the remaining Jem'Hadar, then killed their Vorta.

It left him unsatisfied. He'd done this too many times. He knew what to expect.

It was too easy.

"Computer, end program."

The holodeck returned to its normal grid. It occurred to Klag that he hadn't programmed the right smells. The thing he remembered most about his fight against the Jem'Hadar was the oddly appealing smell of their blood mixed with the white. The holodeck hadn't re-created that to Klag's satisfaction.

"Computer, call up image of M'Raq, son of K'Ton, from his last Defense Force service record."

An image of Klag's father appeared before the captain. It was M'Raq as Klag preferred to remember him tall, broad-shouldered, thick beard, a proud warrior, a commander, first officer on the K'mqar.

As opposed to the image of M'Raq that Klag would always remember, whether he wanted to or not stooped over, patchy white beard, dying, old, weak. Broken.

Fifteen years ago, the K'mqar had gone into battle against the Romulans. M'Raq was captured, and not allowed to die. The Romulans had tortured him, but he did not succumb. Eventually, he escaped and returned home. Since he had not actually given up any intelligence, he was given the opportunity to reclaim his honor by rejoining the Defense Force.

Instead, he had chosen to return to Qo'nos and live out his days like an invalid old woman. The very idea made Klag ill.

For over a decade M'Raq had lingered, his body slowly deteriorating, but the old man had refused to take the final step.

And for over a decade, M'Raq would not say why he chose this. Not

that Klag ever really cared much. He had neither visited nor spoken to his father since he was first posted to the Pagh.

But he knew that his father was supposed to be a great warrior.

Kargan was supposed to be a good captain.

Tiral was supposed to be a competent govern or.

Worf was supposed to be qualified to do his job.

"Toq to Klag."

"Klag."

"Sir, Commander Drex is reporting from Governor Tirol's satellite."

"Put him through."

"Captain," Drex's voice said, " request permission to return to the Gorkon. think I may have found a way to locate the rebels, but I'll need the ship's sensors to do it."

"Granted. Meet me and the ambassador in my office," Klag said.

"Yes, sir. Out."

"Klagtoworf."

"Go ahead," came Worf's deep voice a moment later.

"Report to my office, immediately."

"Acknowledged."

Klag was surprised. He had expected the ambassador to at least ask why.

But no, Worf expects that the ship's captain has a reason for such a summons, and that he will explain it soon enough.

That annoying voice in the back of Klag's head chose that moment to speak up again So why don't you give Worf the same courtesy?

"Computer, remove image and exit."

The image of Commander M'Raq, great soldier of the empire, disappeared.

The image of M'Raq, the old man on his deathbed, remained in Klag's mind.

Worf was already waiting for him as he entered his office. "Drex," Klag said, "has a report regarding the rebels."

"Good."

Drex entered a moment later. "Report," Klag and Worf both said simultaneously. Klag glowered at Worf. Worf didn't even return the captain's gaze.

Handing Worf a padd, Drex said, "I have examined the visual and sensor records made during the attack. I noticed a similarity to

something that happened during the war--specifically, on Dralnok."

"That is a Cardassian planet," Worf said.

Drex nodded. "We took the planet, but one Cardassian garrison eluded our patrols for days. The planet had underground tunnels that we were unaware of, and its crust was lined with a previously unknown element that our scanners couldn't penetrate. The pattern of the rebel movements is very close to what the Cardassians did on Dralnok. And tad is similar to Dralnok geologically."

"You suspect that this element is in tad's crust as well?" Worf asked, looking up from the padd.

"Possibly. The element was simply given a number. But this planet has prewar sensor equipment."

Hag nodded. "The Gorkon should be able to detect this new element?"

"Yes, sir. Any sensor array built after Dralnok was taken, as the Gorkon's was, would be able to."

"Do it," Klag said, getting up. He, Worf, and Drex adjourned to the bridge.

"Lieutenant Toq," Drex said as they entered, " adjust the sensors to penetrate Element 604."

Toq blinked. "Ah, yes, sir."

"Is something wrong, Lieutenant?"

"No, sir. I was simply under the impression that there were only six

hundred and three elements."

"This one is new," Drex said slowly.

"Yes, sir," Toq said, operating his console.

The bridge guard let out a bark of laughter, as did several others.

Klag had to admit to being mildly amused himself. Toq had proven to be an excellent second officer, but he was still quite young.

"Adjustments made, Commander," Toq said. "Preliminary surface scan indicates that the element is present throughout the planet's crust."

"As I suspected," Drex said. "Scan the area around the top aline refinery that was recently attacked."

"Yes, sir." After several seconds "Sir, there is a network of tunnels under the refinery that do not match either our previous scans or the geological records of the planet."

"Good," Klag said.

"Do an extensive scan of the entire planet, Lieutenant," Drex said. "I expect a complete report within half an hour."

"Yes, sir!" Toq said eagerly.

"Captain, Commander," Worf said, "I will speak with you both."

"Is there a problem, Ambassador?" Klag asked. "We should be able to locate the rebel base, and then--"

"I will speak with you both," Worf repeated, more slowly this time, indicating the way to Klag's office with his arm.

Snarling, Klag moved back to his office, Drex on his heels. Klag was well and truly sick of Worf ordering him around like Like someone in charge of the mission? the back-of his-head voice chimed in.

Once in the office with the door closed, Worf asked, "Tell me, Captain, what were your plans once Toq locates the rebel base, as he likely will?" Klag almost said, Aid Governor Tirol in crushing the rebels, obviously.

But that was the wrong answer. After all, if Worf had asked, say, Rodek that question, the gunner would answer that he would obey the orders of his commanding officer. On this mission, at least, that needed to be Klag's answer as well.

His right arm started to itch again.

Sitting in the chair behind his desk, he answered Worf's question "I would advise you to allow me to aid the governor in crushing the rebels."

Worf nodded. "An understandable recommendation on your part."

"So those will be your orders?"

"No."

"What?" Klag rose from his chair angrily. He was nearly apoplectic.

"Ambassador, your task is to solve the problem on tad. If you crush

the rebels, the problem is solved."

To Klag's surprise, Drex spoke up. "No, sir, I don't think it will be."

"What?"

"Before the reports from the refinery came in, I was looking over the publications that Tiral wanted suppressed. There are a lot of them, from all over the planet."

"So?"

"There's more. I looked over the records of the attack. The saboteurs were numerous, and did considerable damage to the refinery, yet no al'Hmatti were seriously injured. Captain, ninety-five percent of the refinery personnel were al'Hmatti. Yet all the casualties and most of the injuries were among the five percent who were Klingon. That cannot be a coincidence."

Klag nodded. "Unless the rebels had some inside help."

"Not just some," Worf said. "I have also seen those records. Most of the al'Hmatti in the refinery had to be assisting the rebels in order for the collateral damage to have been as specific as it was."

"The rebels aren't the problem, Captain, or at least not the only one," Drex said. "The al'Hmatti don't want us here, and the only way to get them in line is to kill them all. And then who will mine the top aline

"So what do we do, just give them the planet?" Klag said with disdain.

"That may be an option," Drex said.

Angrily, Klag rose from his chair. "Might I remind you, Commander, that the chancellor--your father--has made it clear that the planet must remain under Klingon rule?"

To Klag's surprise, Drex said, "I can speak my own mind, Captain." Worf said, "And I answer to the Federation, not Mar tok. This is my mission, and I will proceed as I see fit. When the rebel base is located, I will beam down to meet with them, alone. You will not inform Governor Tiral that we have found the base until after I return, if then. Is that clear, Captain?"

Klag was about to argue, then stopped short. That voice in the back of his head chose that moment to ask, Why are you arguing with him? Your orders were very simple conduct the ambassador to tad and aid him in his mission. His mission, not yours. If he wishes to beam down alone, let him. Perhaps he'll get himself killed and do us all a favor. And if not, it's not your concern.

So Klag simply sat back in his chair and said, "It's quite clear, Ambassador."

"Good. Inform me when Toq has located the base."

Chapter Seven.

Worf looked over the map Toq had created, based on the young lieutenant's sensor sweep of tad on the computer screen in the ambassador's cabin. Toq himself was also present, going over what he had found, pointing out where readings were spotty, and also the areas that seemed to have the greatest activity.

Of course, Worf could have figured all that out himself, but Toq had insisted on leading the ambassador through the map.

"This appears to be the primary base of operations." Toq pointed to an area highlighted in yellow. "We're getting occasional emissions, and most of the life signs have come from there."

"Good. Thank you, Toq."

"Ambassador ..." Toq started.

"Yes?"

"I understand that you are going to the planet alone."

"Yes."

Toq opened his mouth, closed it, then stood ramrod straight. "May I speak freely, sir?"

"Of course."

"You should not go alone!" Toq said, sounding almost pleading. "The rebels hate us! You will be shot on sight!"

"Bekk Krevor will accompany me. She will ensure that I remain safe."

As it was, she was only doing so because Klag insisted. Worf would have preferred to go alone, but he would not be responsible for Krevor being derelict in her duty--especially since that would require Klag to have her put to death.

"It is not enough. You should go down in force."

"If my objective were to make war with the rebels, I would do that very thing. But I am attempting to settle this conflict peacefully."

"Why?" Toq asked, gesturing wildly. "We are warriors!"

Worf smirked slightly. _It_ is difficult to believe that this is the same boy who told me on Carraya that he had no interest in being a warrior. "A true warrior picks his battles carefully, Toq. Simply crushing the rebels would not bring victory--it would only complicate an already difficult situation. It will take more than simple might to end the conflict with the al'Hmatti."

Toq inclined his head. "If you say so, sir," he said dubiously. "But I still think you should at least take one more guard. I would be happy to volunteer for that duty, sir."

"That will not be necessary."

"I am simply concerned for your welfare, Ambassador. No one appreciates your combat skills more than I--but I've been reading dozens of life signs do wn there, at least.

You would be horribly outnumbered. I simply wish to guarantee your safe return to this ship."

Worf remembered speaking those very words to Commander Riker just before he went off to the Pagh--ironically, to serve with Klag. And he had said it after giving Riker a particular piece of equipment--one that wound up helping Riker salvage the near-disaster that the Pagh captain had made of their mission.

"Perhaps you can aid me, Toq. Are there any emergency transponders on board?"

"Of course."

"I will require one, as will Krevor. If either of us activates it, beam us both back immediately."

Toq grinned. "Yes, sir. It will be my pleasure."

"One other thing." He handed Toq a padd with the schematics for the portable scattering field generator he'd been working on. "Can the Gorkon's replicators create this?"

Toq looked over the specs. "We can, sir, but at that size, it will only work for a few minutes."

"That should be sufficient Have one replicated by the time I'm ready to beam down."

"Yes, sir."

The lieutenant turned and left. Before the door could close all the way, it opened again to let Wu in.

"Sir, I hate to be a bother, but Commander Kurak says that she can't give me access to the comm systems without your direct authorization."

Worf blinked. "That is ridiculous."

"I thought much the same thing, sir, but the commander didn't seem to be in the mood to argue. Under the circumstances, I thought it more prudent to simply obtain your permission."

"QI'yah," Worf muttered. It would be a nice change if someone on this vessel--other than Toq--cooperated. "Worftokurak."

A crashing sound came over the speakers.

"Commander?" Worf asked.

Then a whizzing sound, followed by more crashing.

Then laughter. Male laughter.

Then Kurak's voice "Go away!"

Then the connection was cut. Worf looked at Wu. The aide was grinning widely. "I suppose," he said slowly, "we can wait until later."

"No," Worf said, "we cannot. Kurak is obviously off duty, so we will speak to the present duty officer. Come with me."

Worf purposefully exited his quarters. Wu and Krevor both struggled to keep up with his long strides.

He entered engineering. Various crew members attended to their stations. "Who is the duty officer?" he bellowed.

"Uh, I am, sir."

Worf turned toward the hesitant voice. It belonged to Vail, sitting at the environmental controls. Every time Worf looked at the assistant chief engineer, he felt as if he was back in the Federation. How has he survived in the Defense Force this long?

"Lieutenant, I have just been informed by my aide that he was denied access to the Gorkon's communications systems."

Vail nodded. "Yes, sir. Commander Kurak said he needed authorization from the am bass--" He cut himself off and blinked. "That would be you, sir."

"Consider my authorization given, Lieutenant."

Fidgeting in his chair, Vail said, "Sir, I really think that Commander Kurak needs--"

Worf stood over the lieutenant, placing his hands on the arms of the chair, effectively blocking Vail from getting up. "Consider. My authorization. Given."

Vail gulped. "Your, ah, your aide's welcome to--to use the comm systems any time, Ambassador."

"Good. He needs to use them now."

Clapping his hands, Vail said, "Of course, Mr. Ambassador. I'll, ah, I'll just need you to stop looming over me, sir, so I can get up and, ah, and conduct Mr. Wu to the console."

Worf stood up straight, allowing Vail to rise from his chair.

"Right this way," Vail said to Wu, and the pair of them moved toward a corner in engineering.

Krevor approached Worf. "Sir, if you don't mind my asking--why do this in person? Why not just use the intercom?"

"Some things require the personal touch, Bekk. And intimidation is a skill that needs to be practiced."

"I'll remember that, sir."

Klag slew the Vorta again. He thought it would be better this time--he'd finally gotten the smells right, for one thing, and it got his blood boiling--but there still seemed to be something lacking.

It was just too damned easy.

Every time he relived the Battle of Marcan V in the holodeck, it got easier. He wondered if the scenario as he had programmed it--based on his memory of the incident --matched what had truly happened.

Klag had told the story of Marcan V many times in the months since the battle--including once, very recently, to a strange tavern full of fellow ship captains. A song had been written about his exploits and sung at one of the many postwar festivities on Qo'nos--Klag had yet to grow tired of listening to the recording. "Typically, Klag had embellished the stories with retellings, and he wondered if those embellishments had also been programmed into the scenario.

Only one way to find out, he thought.

"Computer, restart program with new parameters," he said. "Create a new plan of attack for the Jem'Hadar based on Dominion War battle reports. And," he added, suddenly inspired, "replace the seven Jem'Hadar with seven different ones, chosen at random. Create them using information from available prisoner-of-war and intelligence databases."

The computer screen blinked the word wait for several seconds before flashing the word ready. Klag smiled. "Begin."

Once again, Klag stood at the Pagh wreckage. Once again, he moved toward where the Jem'Hadar ship crashed.

A Jem'Hadar materialized sooner than expected and cut Klag down.

The holodeck had a mortality fail-safe--after all, there was no honor in dying at the hands of a hologram--so the Jem'Hadar did not actually kill Klag. The blast from the creature's weapon did, however, break a rib or two.

"Computer, restart program." The second time, Klag brought a scanner with him. He managed to slay the first Jem'Hadar---just as the second one materialized behind him and "killed" him.

The third time, the first one attacked Klag's right side, leaving him defenseless.

The fourth time, Klag managed to get through three of them before he was stopped.

The fifth time, he didn't even make it past the first one.

The sixth time, he threw nostalgia to the wind and substituted a disrupter for the mek'leth. He killed four Jem'Hadar that time.

The seventh time, he was stopped before he even saw any Jem'Hadar.

The eighth time, he realized two things. One was that the circumstances on Marcan were unique. The adrenaline surge he had gained from the anger at seeing his crewmates massacred made up for the inherent tactical flaw of going after seven Jem'Hadar while crippled--and was impossible to re-create on a holodeck.

The other was that, his long hours of practice notwithstanding, he was a very long way from being properly skilled at fighting one-handed.

"Computer," he said, breathing heavily now from his exertions, and from the multiple injuries he'd sustained in eight straight hand-to-hand fights, "delete Marcan V program." No more living in the past.

Klag left the holodeck and headed for the medical ward.

He strode purposefully down the corridor, not allowing the great pain he was in to show. He was the captain, after all. And it's time I started acting like it.

Rodek passed him in the corridor. "Captain," the gunner said respectfully.

"Lieutenant." Realizing that Rodek was reporting for his shift--a watch during which Klag was also supposed to be on the bridge, especially with Drex currently detached to Tiral--Klag added, "I will be on the bridge shortly. I have something to discuss with Dr. B'Oraq.

Toq is in command until I return."

"Yes, sir," Rodek said, and Klag noticed the distaste in Rodek's voice. Rodek had never been particularly demonstrative in the past.

"Is there a problem, Lieutenant?"

"No, sir. At least, nothing with which you need concern yourself. It is--personal."

"If you have a personal problem with Lieutenant Toq, I suggest you keep it to yourself, Rodek. The first time I see evidence of it on the bridge will also be the last."

"Yes, sir," Rodek said.

Klag nodded, and continued on his way to the medical ward. That felt good, he thought.

B'Oraq was finishing off a report. Two of the engineers had spent their off-duty time doing bat'leth drills, and one had cut the other's arm open. Pretty standard stuff. B'Oraq had to admit to being bored.

She missed the war. Then, at least, she was always busy. Now, though--they had been in space for a month, and seen only two battles, both of which had been won handily by the Gorkon with minimal injuries.

She had only disposed of two bodies, and her days mostly consisted of the usual contusions of everyday life.

Then the captain walked in.

The doctor's first thought was that Klag had come in to tell her that he'd changed his mind and she had to get rid of the prosthetics. This was based partly on the determined stride with which he entered, as if he had something important and dangerous on his mind.

Her second thought was, He's in terrible pain. This was based on his near-collapse the minute the door closed and no one but B'Oraq could see him. Only the fact that he fell to his left kept him from striking the deck--he braced himself against the wall with his one remaining arm.

"What happened to you?" B'Oraq asked as she ran to him, medical scanner in hand.

"Holodeck," Klag said through gritted teeth.

She guided him slowly to a bio bed and ran the scanner over him.

"Seventeen broken ribs, multiple blaster-fire burns, fractured pelvis " She gave up reading all the injuries aloud. "What were you doing in there, Captain, reliving the entire war?"

"No, just my little corner of it. And I've come to a realization. You were right."

B'Oraq had grabbed a bone-knitter, and now almost dropped it. "What about?" She started applying the knitter to Klag's chest.

"My arm. I must report to the bridge once you are done healing me here, but at a later time--I think I will want to talk further about doing something about my lack of a right arm." B'Oraq smiled. "I look forward to it, Captain. I've got the latest prosthetics that can--"

"You misunderstand me, Doctor," Klag said, his mouth twisting into an expression of disgust. "I have no interest in grafting one of those foul contraptions onto my shoulder." Blinking, B'Oraq said, "In that case, Captain, I'm-well, confused. What other way can we ' something' about your arm?"

"After our last conversation, I took a look through the files in your medical database--to see what I can expect from my Federation-trained medical officer. I noticed that the precursor to prosthetic attachments was live transplants."

The doctor couldn't help but laugh. "Captain, transplants are an outmoded, barbaric form of medicine. You can only use a limb from a recently deceased Klingon with the same blood type as you, and your body may reject even a compatible transplant. With the prosthetic, there's a ninety-five-percent chance of success--with a transplant, even if I can find a viable donor, there's only a sixty percent chance at best"

Klag slammed his one fist onto the bio bed B'Oraq hastily switched off the bone-knitter. As it was, Klag's actions moved his body sufficiently

that B'Oraq came within a crest's-breadth of fusing one of Klag's ribs to his lower aorta.

"I am a warrior! Perhaps you do not know what that means, Doctor, but I do. I will not place a machine on my person and call it part of me.

If I am to restore my warrior's prowess by replacing my arm, I will do it with the limb of a warrior."

"Captain, if you wish me to heal you, you have to sit still," B'Oraq said, trying to keep her voice calm. But her head was swimming. She struggled to keep her hand steady as she turned the bone-knitter back on. "Let me understand this correctly. You not only wish me to perform an antiquated medical procedure on you that may not even work, but it has to be with the limb of a warrior. Not just any Klingon whose biology is compatible with yours."

"Whether it is biologically compatible is irrelevant." Maybe to you, B'Oraq thought, but wisely chose not to say out loud.

"What matters," Klag continued, "is whether or not the arm belongs to someone who is worthy of having his deeds continued on my person. Your task, Doctor, will be to assemble a list of donors. You will make whatever medical determinations need to be made, but I will approve the list on the basis of their worthiness to be part of the Hero of Marcan." Shaking her head, B'Oraq said, "Sir, the chances--"

"Those are my orders, Doctor. Are you finished?"

Moving the bone-knitter down toward Klag's hip, she said, "With the ribs, but there's still--" She was by the door opening once again. Leskit and Kurak entered, the latter supporting the former, who had a long gash in his left thigh. They were both out of uniform--in fact, they were out of almost everything, each wearing only a long, loose shirt.

"You didn't tell me you had a sword there," Leskit was saying.

"I never expected us to make it all the way to-Captain!" she said quickly upon sighting Klag, who sat up at the intrusion.

B'Oraq took Leskit from Kurak and brought him to another bio bed "What happened?"

"Slight accident with a sword," Leskit said. "It's minor."

"I'll be the judge of that." B'Oraq examined the wound. In fact, Leskit was right, it wasn't that bad. The cut was long, but not very deep, and would be simple to repair.

However, since the captain's injuries were more serious, B'Oraq handed Leskit a bandage. "Put pressure on it. I'll be with you in a minute."

She started repairing Klag's pelvic fracture. B'Oraq was more than a little surprised. She hadn't thought Kurak the type to engage in a shipboard liaison, least of all with Leskit. Such an act required a level of frivolity that B'Oraq hadn't given the engineer credit for.

But then, she thought, it seems to be my day for being surprised by the personnel of this ship.

As she finished knitting the fracture, the alarm went off. Toq's voice sounded over the speakers "Alert status! All hands to battle stations! Captain Klag to the bridge!"

Klag, naturally, stood. Knowing full well she wouldn't get to finish the sentence, B'Oraq started, "Captain, you--"

"--will finish this after the battle, if we are still alive." As he headed to

the door, he looked at Kurak and Leskit. "Commander, report to engineering.

Lieutenant, with me."

The pair exchanged a glance. They were out of uniform.

Before they could say anything, B'Oraq said, "Lieutenant Leskit needs medical attention, Captain, he--"

Klag looked at Leskit. "Can you sit upright?"

Shrugging, Leskit said, "Yes."

"Do your hands work?"

"Oh, yes," he said with a grin. Kurak actually looked away at that.

B'Oraq fought to contain her reaction.

"Then you can fly the ship. You're with me."

The three of them left the medical ward with dispatch.

B'Oraq looked around at the now-empty room. She wondered if boredom might not be so bad.

She sat down to compose a letter to Beverly Crusher. She had to share today's news with the one person who could properly appreciate it.

The cave into which Worf and Krevor materialized was, if anything,

colder than the council chambers. Worf would not have believed it possible, especially since this tunnel was rock rather than ice.

It was also dark--even more so than the Gorkon. There was a light source farther down the corridor, but it took a few moments for Worf's eyes to adjust. He and Krevor moved up against the wall, which angled inward. The tunnel was barely taller than Worf himself, and his head kept brushing up against the tiny stalactites on the tunnel roof.

Krevor held a hand scanner. She whispered, "Sir, readings are sporadic. I can't get a fix."

Worf peered over at the bekk's scanner. "The hand scanner isn't as powerful as the shipboard sensors," he whispered back, "and the concentration of Element 604 is especially high here--which is probably why the rebels chose it. Here." He made a few adjustments, and the scan quality improved.

"Thank you, sir. There are four al'Hmatti coming this way ."

Worf nodded to Krevor, who moved into an alcove, out of sight. Worf moved to the center of the tunnel.

He could hear the al'Hmatti before he could see them. They spoke in their native tongue, which shared a certain guttural quality with the Klingon language.

A light moved toward Worf slowly around a bend, then the al'Hmatti themselves came into view. One held a hand lamp and walked on her hind legs, albeit stooped over; the cave could not accommodate the average al'Hmatti at full height. The others were on all fours. Unlike the ones Worf had seen in the council chambers and on the satellite, these al'Hmatti all had indulged in some form of bodily decoration and or modification. Some wore necklaces (only females, he noticed), others wore earrings, many wore both. A few had let their fur grow out in spots and braided it, or tied it in a ponytail or topknot. Some

had shaved their fur, exposing the skin underneath--which, to Worf's surprise, was a deep black color, in stark contrast to the light-colored fur.

All four of them had the same pattern shaved into the sides of their heads--some on the left, some on the right.

"Greetings." Worf's voice echoed in the tunnel. "I am Ambassador Worf of the United Federation of Planets. I would speak with your commander."

An al'Hmatti bellowed three words, one of which was Klingon, and then three of them--all but the one holding the hand lamp--shifted their weight to their hind legs and moved to un holster their disruptors.

Before they could do so, Worf had unholstered his own disrupter and fired a shot over the al'Hmatti's furred heads.

"No weapons, please," he said. "I wish to discuss terms with your commander." One of the al'Hmatti said, "We will die before we " anything with you conquerors!" and then continued taking out her weapon.

"Don't do it," said Krevor, who appeared behind the al'Hmatti, as planned. She placed her disrupter's muzzle into the neck of the al'Hmatti who had spoken.

Then two disrupter shots fired from around the bend, missing Krevor's head by millimeters.

"Death to the Klingons!" one of the al'Hmatti cried.

All four al'Hmatti went for their disruptors. Worf fell to the ground while firing two shots. He stunned two of the rebels before they could

fire. Krevor shot a third--the one she had gotten the drop on. The fourth fired a shot that would have hit Worf had he not ducked. Worf took out that fourth al'Hmatti with another shot.

Krevor was then hit in the shoulder with another blast from behind. As she fell, she fired back; Worf heard a scream a moment later, indicating that she'd hit someone.

Time, he thought, to end this. As he ran over to Krevor--ducking a disrupter blast--he shrugged out of the backpack in which he'd been carrying the scattering field generator. When he was at Krevor's side, he activated th e field.

The disrupter fire stopped.

Several angry shouts came from down the tunnel as the al'Hmatti tried to fire disrupters that would no longer function. The scattering field would only keep the disruptors inactive for a few minutes--but that should be all I need, Worf thought.

"I would speak with your commander!" Worf repeated.

An al'Hmatti with gray fur ran toward Worf on all fours, moving with tremendous speed for one of such bulk. Worf barely had time to unsheath his mek'leth, and did not have time to use it.

The al'Hmatti leapt at Worf, who fell backward to roll with the impact.

The al'Hmatti tried to claw and bite Worf, but she hadn't expected him to roll. The two of them tumbled over into the tunnel wall. Worf managed to angle it so that the al'Hmatti took the brunt of the impact.

Hissing, the al'Hmatti tried to bite Worf's neck. At the last second, Worf twisted himself so that she bit his left shoulder instead. Her teeth

penetrated the thermal suit.

Worf grabbed the woman's muzzle with his right hand and, with his left, stabbed her in the side with the mek'leth, She let go and screamed, giving Worf the opportunity to throw her off of him--an action that took all of his considerable strength. She fell to the floor, blood darkening the fur on her right side.

He looked over to see Krevor struggling with a white furred male al'Hmatti. He swiped at her with a giant paw, which she partly dodged.

Instead of taking her head off, it only scratched her right cheek and ripped out some of her black hair. She had bolstered her disrupter and unsheathed her d'k tahg. Now she slashed at the al'Hmatti with it.

Like her, he dodged; like him, she drew blood anyhow, following the move with a punch to the al'Hmatti's stomach. It had no effect on the al'Hmatti that Worf could see, as the alien then lunged forward, hissing. Krevor ducked and rolled under the lunge and took another swipe with the d'k tahg, this time at the side of the al'Hmatti's neck.

The al'Hmatti had fallen to the ground on its stomach, but he got up quickly. Worf was about to move to aid Krevor, but that proved unnecessary, as she took another swipe at his neck. The al'Hmatti bled from four wounds, two in the neck, one in the upper chest--and one, to Worf's surprise, in the stomach, where Krevor had punched him. She must have blades in her gauntlets, he thought.

The last cut to the neck did it. The al'Hmatti stumbled backward, clutching pointlessly at his neck with black padded paws, failing to stanch the blood that flowed freely from the wound.

Worf and Krevor turned to face the other al'Hmatti, who circled cautiously around the Klingons.

The combined smell of al'Hmatti and Klingon blood was intoxicating.

Pain wracked Worf's left shoulder, sending his brain into a pleasant haze. He felt the adrenaline churn within him, heard the cry of his warrior's heart. His mind's eye could see the al'Hmatti lying bloody at his feet.

For the briefest of instants, Worf let the pure Klingon within him come to the fore, let the bouquet of the blood wash over him. It would be so easy to give in completely and show these creatures what a true warrior was capable of.

But these weren't creatures, these were sentient beings fighting for their home. And he was here as a diplomat, not a warrior. It was time he acted like one.

Decades of living among humans had forced Worf to learn how to suppress his natural Klingon urges with relative ease. He straightened as much as he could in the cave and dropped his mek'leth to the ground. As he turned to Krevor, he grabbed his shoulder where the al'Hmatti had bitten him, putting pressure on the wound. "Drop your weapon, Bekk."

"But, sir--" Krevor gave a vicious snarl. Her own blood lust was rising as well.

"Now!"

Trying and failing to keep the disgust off her face, Krevor dropped her blade.

Worf turned to the al'Hmatti, who still circled the two Klingons, most of them on all fours. "I am the Federation ambassador that you requested! If you wish to end the fighting, you will listen to me--if you do not, I will alert Governor Tiral and he will obliterate this base!"

One of the al'Hmatti males stepped forward on his hind legs. Worf assumed him to be one of the leaders, if not the leader himself. "Do you think me a fool to believe that such as you represent the Federation?"

"Do you think your enemies to be such fools as to commit so obvious a deception?"

The al'Hmatti glared at him. "Perhaps not. Identify yourself."

"I am Worf, son of Mogh. Although Klingon by birth, I was raised in the Federation and served in Starfleet for fifteen years before I was made ambassador after the Dominion War."

"I've heard of you. As I recall, you were involved in the installation of Chancellor Gowron when you served under Captain Desoto on the Endeavour. Desoto was Chancellor K'mpec's arbiter of succession."

"I served on the Enterprise at that time," Worf said, "under Captain Picard, who was K'mpec's arbiter. I find your transparent attempt to test me insulting."

"Perhaps, but I feel it is necessary." The al'Hmatti stepped forward.

"I am re'Trenat. I believe I am the person you have sought out."

"If you lead these rebels, then yes, you are."

"Tell me, Ambassador, do you always attend diplomatic negotiations armed?"

"Only ones where I expect to be shot at on sight."

"Fair enough," re'Trenat said. "Fetch the doctor for ma'Frnats and the others," he said to one of the al'Hmatti, who nodded and loped off on all fours. "Come with me, please, Ambassador."

Another al'Hmatti, a female with yellowish fur, said something urgent in their native tongue.

Before re'Trenat could respond, Worf said, "If I were here to do anything other than talk--I would not be here at all. The Gorkon would simply obliterate this entire cave system from orbit. That is still an option if I am not satisfied with this meeting."

"You speak our language?" re'Trenat said.

"No. But your comrade's concern is obvious. You don't trust me, even though I am here at your behest. Even though I did not fire the first shot. Even though I am all that is keeping you alive right now. The officers of the Gorkon are the ones who found your base, re'Trenat, not the tad authorities. I have not shared this intelligence with Governor Tiral--yet. Whether I do or not depends upon our discussions. If I had, you would not be alive to discuss the matter."

"Our lives are unimportant, Ambassador. We will do whatever it takes to ensure that our people are free."

"Including working with the Kreel?"

Some of the al'Hmatti started to hiss. However, re'Trenat simply bared his teeth. "You are well informed, Ambassador. Come--let us discuss the situation."

"Very well."

A couple of al'Hmatti moved past Worf, one glaring at him. Worf

stared back. He had no desire to harm the al'Hmatti unnecessarily, but he could hardly have responded any other way to a frontal assault.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to do anything about your injuries," re'Trenat said. "Our medical supplies are limited, and I'd prefer to use them on our own people. Besides, I doubt I can convince our doctor to patch up people who killed some of our own."

"As I said, re'Trenat, we did not fire first."

The rebel leader did not reply to that, but simply led Worf and Krevor through the tunnel to a more spacious cavern, one in which even the al'Hmatti could comfortably stand upright. Worf found himself subjected to more of the same ugly stares. He ignored them and studied his surroundings. Though not as well lit, nor as clean as the council chambers, they felt more lived-in. Part of this was the complete lack of any Klingon decor, which had seemed clumsily superimposed in the other structure. Although most of the furnishings were weapons, computer equipment, and food storage, he also saw a few paintings. They were quite hideous--Worf hadn't seen anything that stomach-churning since Data had foisted his "expressionistic" painting of the Battle of Haros on Worf as a birthday present--but also defiantly not Klingon. Worf did not imagine that these could have been displayed anywhere publicly. Neither could the sculpture that stood in one corner; where all the other statuary Worf had seen on-planet were of Klingons, this was of an al'Hmatti standing on her hind legs, hefting an odd-shaped sword that looked like an Earth-style cutlass in one foreleg.

Noticing Worf's gaze falling on the statue, re'Trenat said, "That is me'Grmat VI--the last true emperor we had before your people removed the teeth from that great office. We keep the statue there to remind us of what we hope to once again have."

Worf also noticed several readers with familiar-looking titles--they were all on Governor Tiral's list of forbidden publications.

"I'm afraid we don't have any chairs," re'Trenat said as he lay on the

floor. "We don't get many bipedal visitors. In fact, you two are the first. And I'm curious as to how you found us. We were under the impression that these caves were impervious to scans."

"Emphasis on the past tense," Worf said.

"I see. Tell me, Ambassador, how did you know we'd contacted the Kreel?"

"It was not difficult--Kreel raids have increased in this area, and every attack has been on a ship bound for this system. Obviously you made a deal with them to raid any supply ships that come into this vicinity."

"Yes. I had been hoping the Kreel would be less obvious --"

"That is an impossibility with the Kreel."

The rebel leader bared his teeth again. "So it would seem. In any event, they were more than happy to do anything to disrupt Klingon activity, so they did. They also provided us with some of our weapons, and the ships we attacked the governor's satellite with."

"In exchange for what?"

Stretching briefly, re'Trenat said, "Very little--just first opportunity at mining rights once we got rid of the Klingons." Settling back down into a lying position, re'Trenat looked right at Worf with his obsidian eyes. "So, Ambassador, this brings us to you. Why are you h ere?"

"An interesting question for you to ask, since it was your request that the Federation get involved."

"That was four years ago. To be honest, we had given up hope, especially once you and the empire were no longer enemies. That is

why we contacted the Kreel--if one enemy of the empire was lost to us, we would try another."

"In case you have not heard, re'Trenat, there has been a war on. That made things--difficult."

"Your difficulties are no concern of mine, Ambassador --and neither is your war."

"That is shortsighted. If the Dominion had won, the Klingon Empire would be the least of your problems."

"I can't imagine that the Dominion would be any worse."

"Then you lack imagination--which I somehow doubt." Worf picked up one of the readers. "I have read some of your work--at least, I assume it was yours. Though the bylines change from publication to publication, the style has remained consistent. It is obviously the work of a single author."

Laughing, re'Trenat said, "I'm impressed, Ambassador. Most Klingons wouldn't pick out such nuances."

"As I said, I was raised by humans from the age of six--I went to their schools. Human scholars have a tendency to over examine literature that goes well beyond the pedantic."

"I'm afraid I wouldn't know about such things, Ambassador. What I do know is that we asked the Federation for help. Until now, we've gotten nothing. Now we have you. And to be honest, I had thought you to be a fraud."

"I assume that you attacked the refinery once em'Rlakun informed you that the Klingons had " about sending a Federation ambassador."

Nodding, re'Trenat said, "I'm afraid so. But I don't regret what we did."

"You should. My assignment is to bring about a peaceful solution to the difficulties here. Attacks such as yesterday's do not aid in that process."

Again, re'Trenat laughed. "Ambassador, forgive me, but the attack was irrelevant to your finding a solution. Indeed, you have the easiest of tasks. Tell the Klingons to leave. Solution found."

"It is not that simple."

"It is for me." Re'Trenat got up from his prone position. "I won't bore you with speeches about what a proud people we once were, Ambassador. We have always been a contentious, barbaric race. But I believe we have the capacity for greatness within us. The only thing standing in the way of that greatness is the Klingon Empire--an empire that obviously doesn't care one whit for us. We toil in mines with substandard equipment. We are assigned governors who are fools. And then, when we rebel against the empire, their response is indifference--followed by sending a Federation ambassador. It is obvious that the empire cares little for us, so why should we care for them?"

Re'Trenat spoke with a passion that impressed Worf. He had seen this kind of rallying charisma before, particularly in Shakaar Edon, the former resistance fighter and current Bajoran First Minister--not to mention the captains he'd served under.

"It is not that simple," Worf repeated. "The empire cannot simply allow you your independence. That would be a sign of weakness."

"Yes, and we all know how Klingons hate to seem weak. But it does not matter. We will fight until the Klingons are gone."

"Or until they kill you," Worf said. "The empire has been patient with you thus far, in part due to the distractions of the war. You may see it as indifference, but sooner or later, they will grow weary of you and destroy you."

Re'Trenat started to circle Worf like a predator about to leap on its prey. "We are prepared to die."

Worf stood his ground, keeping his eyes on re'Trenat. "What makes you think you will die? There is nothing to be gained by making a martyr of you or your people. No, they will kill the innocents, the workers you claim to be fighting for."

"They've tried that."

"Only on a small scale. That scale will escalate. How far are you willing to go?"

"As far as we have to." The rebel leader stood on his hind legs and walked up to Worf. Worf looked up at him, unblinking. "You can have Governor Tiral destroy this base, Ambassador. You can seek out other rebel bases and destroy them. You can line up another hundred thousand al'Hmatti and have them shot. None of it will make a difference. I am merely the most overt example--but none of the al'Hmatti will tolerate a Klingon presence on our world any longer. And we will fight for that to our dying breaths."

Worf nodded. He had, in truth, expected this, but he had also needed to hear it directly from the rebel leader-he needed to know how far they would go.

"For what it is worth," he said after a moment, "the Federation will not allow you to be exterminated as a race."

"I'm very glad to hear that," re'Trenat said with a small chuckle. "I am prepared to die, Ambassador, but I'm not eager to."

"I am waiting to hear from my government. We will speak again soon."

"I look forward to it," re'Trenat said, and unlike em'Rlakun, he sounded sincere.

"One last question, re'Trenat."

"Yes?"

"What is that symbol you all have shaved into your heads?"

Moving one foreleg to his left cheek, where the symbol was shaved, re'Trenat said, "You really don't know our language, do you? Unlike Klingon, Ambassador, our written language takes the form of pictograms.

This one is for victory. We will not stop until we have achieved it, or we have died."

Worf nodded. "In that, you share much with your foes."

"Perhaps," re'Trenat said.

"I will be in touch." Worf activated the communicator on his wrist.

"Worf to Gorkon. Two to beam up."

The sound of an alert klaxon blared through the communicator. "That will not be possible, Ambassador," said Toq. "We're under attack by a Kreel squadron."

Chapter Eight.

Klag entered the bridge at a dead run, completely ignoring the pain that lingered in his battered form. "Report!"

Though technically in command until Klag's arrival, Toq had remained at his operations station. " A squadron of six Kreel ships came out of warp and are closing on our position."

"Has the ambassador returned from the surface?" Klag moved to his command chair. Behind him, Leskit hobbled to the helm--garnering the pilot more than a few stares of confusion, since he was wearing only a loose, long shirt and his omnipresent neck bone necklace.

Toq said, "No. I have been in contact with him, however, and he's aware of our situation."

"Good." He had the feeling that, if Worf was on board, the ambassador would insist on being on the bridge again, and Klag didn't need the distraction. Besides, if the Gorkon did fall today, both Worf and Drex would survive on tad, and perhaps complete the mission.

"Take us out of orbit, pilot," he said to Leskit. "Attack posture.

Gunner, ready all weapons and put tactical display on main screen."

A computer-drawn image appeared on the screen. A green light indicated the Gorkon's position, six red lights designated the Kreel, and two yellow lights, one large, one small, represented tad and its moon. The Kreel ships were arranged in an ellipsoid pattern one in front, four in a diamond formation behind them, and then the sixth in the rear. The computer automatically numbered the ships, since Kreel

vessels didn't come with any kind of identification markings--not that anyone ever felt the need to program a way of identifying them into Defense Force computers. Kreel ships didn't deserve names.

"We're receiving a message from the Kreel," Toq said.

This ought to be good, Klag thought. He was tempted not to listen to it--what could the Kreel possibly have to say to him?--but he decided that he needed the laugh. "On audio."

"Klingon vessel Gorkon. This is the Glione. You stand accused of the destruction of Kreel property--to wit, the vessel Zabag--and of murdering forty Kreel nationals--to wit, the crew of the vessel Zabag.

You have been tried and convicted, and this fleet is to carry out your death sentence. If you surrender, you--"

"Audio off," Klag said. It wasn't even that good a laugh, he thought with an internal sigh. And only the Kreel would think that a mere six ships comprise a fleet.

Leskit turned to the captain. "Permission to quake in my boots at this dire threat, Captain."

Toq laughed. "You're not wearing boots, Leskit." Laughter spread through the rest of the bridge.

Grinning, Klag said, "Quake on your own time, pilot. For now, change course to one-eight-seven mark nine and proceed at full impulse when I give the order. Gunner, on my mark, I want a full spread of quantum torpedoes at ships one and three."

"Yes, sir," said Leskit.

"Weapons locked," Rodek said, "and the lead ship is firing on us."

"Not even waiting for a reply before carrying out their sentence." Klag let out a derisive snort. "Typical. Evasive maneuvers, and prepare to fire and change course."

Leskit and Rodek said, "Yes, sir," simultaneously.

"Ships two and four also firing," Rodek added.

"Fire torpedoes and change course," Klag said.

Rodek said, "Torpedoes away."

"Course one-eight-seven mark nine," Leskit said.

Toq said, "Multiple phaser hits to aft. Shields at eighty percent."

According to the screen, the six ships maintained formation as they followed the Gorkon. "Maintain course," Klag said. "Continuous aft disrupter fire on lead ship." He thought a moment. "Is the Sompek still in this sector?" Toq paused to check his console. "Yes, sir. They are half an hour away at maximum warp."

"Signal them that there is a battle they may join if they wish."

Leskit looked over at him. "Captain, at this speed, we'll be in the system's asteroid belt in three minutes. I take it you wish to lose them in the belt?"

"No, I wish the Kreel to think that's what we're trying."

Sure enough, the Kreel changed formation, as Klag had hoped. Three of them hung back and went into a triangle formation, while the other three lined up in a tighter pattern and continued firing on the Gorkon.

The rear three ships would remain outside the belt, with only the front three attempting to navigate the hazardous asteroid field.

"Shields now at seventy percent," said Toq. "And a message from the Kreel. They say we can't hide in the asteroid belt."

Good of the Kreel to follow the lyrics to the song, Klag thought as he got up and walked over to Leskit, who was flying one-handed while maintaining the pressure on his wound. "Lieutenant, when we are forty thousand qeu'qams from the perimeter of the asteroid belt, I want you to change our heading to three-two-zero mark one eight and put us between the two sets of ships."

"Assuming I can do it one-handed, sir," Leskit said, shooting the captain a look.

Klag laughed. "If we live through this, Leskit, I'll bandage your wound myself."

"I'll hold you to that, Captain."

"Kreel are gaining on us and continuing to fire," Toq said. "Shields at fifty-five percent."

Rodek added, "Lead ship is breaking off attack. Their structural integrity field is failing."

Klag moved over to the tactical station. "Is that the ship that sent the message?" he asked Toq.

"Yes, sir."

"Good." The captain smiled broadly. To Rodek, he said, "Keep focusing your fire on that lead ship. When we change course, I want rapid disrupter fire on all six ships."

"The computer will not be able to target the ships that quickly." Rodek spoke in his usual matter-of-fact tone.

"You'll have to do it manually, Lieutenant If you're not capable of that--"

"I never said that, sir."

"Good," said Klag.

"Fifty-five thousand qell'qams to belt perimeter," Leskit called out.

"Another hit!" Toq said--and Klag could hear the worry in the boy's voice. "Shields at forty percent!"

"Forty-five thousand qell'qams," added Leskit, somewhat more calmly.

"Shields on Kreel vessel number two down to ten percent. Damage to their hull," Rodek said.

"Forty thousand," Leskit said.

"Standby--execute," Klag said. He had a tremendous urge to clench his right fist.

The Gorkon swung around on an elliptical course that took it right

into the midst of the Kreel ships. The two remaining front ships were caught off guard, and continued firing into the asteroid belt several times before compensating. The three rear ships had their shields up but were unable to return fire before Rodek got each of them with a disrupter blast.

Then, however, each of the Kreel ships got shots off.

"Evasive course, two-nine-zero mark four, execute!" Klag cried.

"Heavy damage to Kreel ships, sir" Rodek said. "Number five is destroyed, and number one remains out of action."

Toq added, "Our shields are now down to twenty percent, sir. A few more shots, and we will be defenseless."

"Klag to engineering. I need more power to the shields."

"All nonessential systems have been diverted to tactical and life support, Captain," said Kurak's tinny voice over the speakers. "You've got everything you're going to get."

When Emperor me'Grmat XDC woke up, he couldn't breathe.

Naturally, the servant summoned a doctor immediately, and the fluid was cleared from me'Grmat's lungs. By lunchtime, everything was fine, and he was the picture of health, for a one-hundred-and-fifty-year-old al'Hmatti.

He didn't tell the physician, of course, that he hadn't wanted the help. If this was how he was to die, then he was ready for it. But he could neither breathe nor talk-and besides, the doctor knew that she would be put to death by the Klingons if she didn't do everything in her power to save the emperor.

He lay on his cushion, his appointments for the day all canceled while he rested.

Or so he thought. In midafternoon, a servant came in. "Your Eminence, you have a visitor."

"I beg your pardon?" me'Grmat said.

"It's the Federation ambassador, Your Eminence. He insists on being granted an audience."

Rolling over onto his side, me'Grmat sighed and said, "Let him in."

The emperor had heard about Ambassador Worf, of course. His arrival with the Gorkon was all the servants had talked about for days. Some said he was supposed to solve the problems with the rebels. Others said he was a Defense Force agent posing as a diplomat. Me'Grmat had to admit to confusion as to why the ambassador would want to see him.

The emperor was probably the one al'Hmatti left on the planet who had no congress with the rebels whatsoever. Unless you counted re'Trenat's constant pleas to the emperor, but me'Grmat preferred not to.

The Klingon who entered was short, like most of their race, and he naturally wore a thermal suit. Another Klingon, a female, followed behind him. Both of them had been injured--the ambassador had a bandage on his left shoulder, and the female had abrasions on her face and her hair was uneven, as if something had sliced off half the hair on her right side.

"Forgive me for not rising," me'Grmat said, "but my doctor prescribed bed rest. She seems to have a quaint idea that she's going to keep me alive. In any case, I am me'Grmat XIX. You must be the ambassador

everyone is talking about."

"I am Worf, son of Mogh. I wish to speak to you."

"Obviously, your wishes are often granted. I wasn't supposed to see anyone today."

"This was the best opportunity," Worf said, walking closer to the cushion. A servant dashed in with a chair that had been liberated from some other room and set it near me'Grmat. Worf sat in it. The female stood by the entryway--must be his bodyguard or something, me'Grmat thought.

"Oh?"

"The Gorkon is currently otherwise occupied, so I thought I would take this opportunity to meet with you."

"While I'm flattered, Ambassador, I can't really see why you would wish to see me."

The ambassador's mouth twisted somewhat-me'Grmat realized that it was a smirk. "Prime Minister em'Rlakun said much the same thing when I met with her--and that meeting was quite educational. However, it was re'Trenat who suggested I speak with you. When I realized that I would be on-planet for longer than anticipated, he suggested coming to see you."

"Yes, well, re'Trenat has always had an inflated sense of my importance."

"He is not the only one," Worf said, pulling a reader of some sort out of a pocket in his thermal suit. "I have been reading the underground publications that have been disseminated of late. They all speak very highly of you, despite the fact that you continually speak out against the rebellion. And Tiral obviously thinks you're worth keeping alive.

You may be the only person on this planet who is admired by both sides."

"You're a diplomat, Ambassador. You should therefore appreciate the art of the compromise. I suppose I once earned that respect from all parties. But now I am simply content to do what I am told by those who gave me this position. If that means speaking out against the rebels, so be it"

"Interesting," Worf said, rubbing his chin.

"Fascinating," me'Grmat said.

"What?" Worf asked, looking perturbed.

"Well, for one thing, until you rather snidely said, '?" just now, I found myself unable to read your facial expression at all. I've been working with Klingons all my life, and you're the first one who didn't wear his emotions on his fur, so to speak. I suppose that's necessary in your line of work." Worf did not reply to that, but instead said, "I have been assigned to find a peaceful solution to this planet's difficulties. According to re'Trenat, you are the most peaceful person on this world." Laughing, me'Grmat said, "And again you betray your emotions. Like any Klingon, you have trouble wrapping your snout around the word peaceful." He sighed. "In any case, Ambassador, I'm not sure such a solution is possible. Perhaps I am what re'Trenat calls me. My primary concern is to die in my bed. And you don't need to hide your disgust. I know how Klingons feel about that-- that you should die with a bat'leth in your hand and a song in your heart. But that holds no interest for me. I wish to simply live out my life in as quiet a way as possible. If that means supporting Tiral, then I shall do it.

"But I will tell you this, Ambassador. This planet is caught in a cycle. Neither side will give up. Death will not deter the al'Hmatti--that's been fairly proven by this point--and it never deters a Klingon. I suspect your task to be impossible."

"According to re'Trenat, my task is simple get the Klingons to leave."

"But that won't happen, will it?"

"Not easily, no. Though there is another possibility relocating the afhmatti."

Me'Grmat could not help but laugh heartily at that. So much so, in fact, that he fell into rather a nasty coughing fit. By the time it ran its course, he looked up to see Worf standing over him, a look of concern on his face. "I'm fine," me'Grmat managed to get out. "Really.

It's my own fault for laughing so hard. Or perhaps yours for saying something so funny."

"You do not believe relocation to be a legitimate option?"

"No, I most certainly do not. Ambassador, this is our home. The Klingons invaded. It seems to me that they should leave before we should." Once again, me'Grmat sighed. seem to spend all my time sighing these days.

"Not that either side will. I'm sorry, Ambassador, but you've wasted your time coming here. I am just an old man who is waiting for the afterlife to get its act together and take me away. W hile I appreciate the kind words re'Trenat had for me, they are of no consequence."

Another sigh. "I believe this audience is at an end."

Worf nodded. "So it would seem. Thank you for your time, Your Eminence."

Blinking, me'Grmat said, "What?"

"Is something wrong?"

"You called me, "Your Eminence.""

"That is the proper form of address for the emperor, is it not?"

"Oh, it is, it is, but ... Ambassador, in all the years I've been emperor, you're the first Klingon ever to use that address. Thank you."

Worf inclined his head, and then departed without another word. The Klingon female followed him.

An interesting individual, me'Grmat thought. A pity I won't get to know him.

Vail stood at his station in engineering, listening to Commander Kurak tell the captain they had everything they were going to get.

Except, of course, they didn't. But can I tell her that without getting killed?

Then he looked at the shield displays--twenty percent, and falling.

Four ships were moving into position around the Gorkon and continuing to fire--though their phaser blasts were weaker and coming less frequently now.

Still, the Gorkon was outnumbered four to one, and the shields would be gone in another minute. Individually, the Gorkon would make short work of any of these foes, but the sheer numbers meant they would be overwhelmed once the shields fell.

Unless ... He turned to Kurak, who was moving from station to station.

She gripped her right wrist with her left arm so tightly, Vail was sure the circulation to her right hand was being cut off. She wore only a very flimsy tunic, and it wasn't until this moment that Vail realized how attractive his commanding officer was. The rest of the engineering staff had been just as bad, trying desperately not to look at her state of undress. If it wasn't for Kurak's perpetual scowl, she probably wouldn't have gotten a bit of work out of any of them.

"Commander!" Vail called out.

"What?" Kurak snapped.

"There is a way to increase shield power. We can use the power from the holodeck."

Kurak rolled her eyes. "You imbecile, the systems are incompatible! We can't--"

"Yes, we can, Commander--or, at least, 7 can. I have conquered the system incompatibility by constructing a converter that can dump power from the holodeck into an engineering system. It is in my quarters. I did not inform you of the device because you told me--"

"Enough!" Kurak cried, closing her eyes. Then she opened them and stared at Vail.

Vail held his breath.

"Do it. I'll kill you later."

Having no idea if she was serious or not, and not really able to care at the moment, Vail ran to his quarters.

Today is a really bad day to die, Klag thought sourly while sitting in his command chair.

The shields were almost gone. The disruptors still had plenty of power, and Klag had rationed the use of the quantum torpedoes so they still had half their stock left, but things were starting to get ugly.

The Sompek had signaled back, saying they were en route, but they were still half an hour away.

"Kreel vessel number six destroyed," Rodek said, "and reading no power output from number one."

That's three down, Klag thought. And the remaining three were at diminished capacity. But so was the Gorkon. Once the shields fell ... am Klag, son of M'Raq, he thought. After all I've accomplished, after finally achieving my own command, I refuse to fall to the Kreel!

"Number four is increasing speed," Leskit said. "It looks like the Kreel are trying to surround us."

Klag spit. "Typical. That might have worked if they still had all six ships. Rodek, concentrate fire on number four. Leskit, increase speed to three-quarters impulse and change course to one-zero-three mark four."

"Aye, sir." Leskit steered the Gorkon through one of the holes in the Kreel's attempt to surround them.

The course took them in the general direction of tad's moon. "Toq, is there sufficient power to activate the cloaking device?" Klag asked.

Toq checked his panel. "No, sir." Another impact. "Shields have fallen! We--" Then something beeped on Toq's console. "Sir, available power increasing! I don't understand it, but--"

"Engineering to bridge. You now have full power."

Cheers rang out all across the bridge.

"Full shields," Klag said, getting up from his chair. "Leskit, you had better be treating that woman right."

Several officers turned in surprise at that. Klag couldn't help but smile. Most surely guessed that Leskit's injury--and reason for being on the bridge out of uniform --was due to a liaison with one of the women on board, but Klag doubted any of them had guessed that the woman was Kurak. If Klag hadn't seen it himself ... Enough of that. "Set a course to orbit tad's moon, full impulse," he said, walking over toward Leskit. "The second the Kreel ships fall out of sensor range, full stop and activate cloaking device."

It was a risky maneuver. The Kreel ships were close enough together that they would likely all have the same blind spot "behind" the moon, but it was possible that one of them might still be able to pick the Gorkon up when they cloaked. It was fairly easy to follow a cloaked ship if one saw it cloak--or at least, Klag thought, the Federation or the Dominion could. The Kreel probably don't have sufficiently acute sensors.

As the Gorkon flew in its elliptical orbit around the moon, Toq said, "Kreel still in sensor range."

"Number four breaking off," Rodek said. "Their structural integrity is failing. Two and three closing in, though presently out of weapons range."

"Kreel now off sensors," Toq said a moment later.

Klag nodded. "Full stop. Engage cloak."

The already-dim lights dimmed further as the cloak was engaged.

Kurak's voice sounded over the speakers. "Captain, we can only maintain the cloak for ten more minutes. This additional power is limited."

"Understood, Commander." Klag turned to the pilot, whom he was still standing behind. " Leskit, put us on an intercept course for ship number four."

"Yes, sir."

"Rodek, train a spread of torpedoes on that ship and get ready to fire on my order." The gunner nodded, while Toq said, "Sir, vessels two and three are engaged in a search pattern." Klag smiled. "Good. Let me know if they find anything." Smiling back, Toq said, "Yes, sir!"

"And also," Klag added, "inform me if Commander Kurak's ten minutes are in any danger of expiring."

Leskit said, "We're in weapons range of the fourth Kreel ship, sir."

"Torpedoes locked," Rodek said with his usual lack of enthusiasm.

"Captain," Toq said. "I have discovered something."

Klag strode over to the operations console. "What is it?" He assumed that it was something important enough to mention in the midst of a battle. If it isn't--well, I'll make sure Toq doesn't make the same

mistake twice.

"The asteroids in this system have a similar geologic structure to that of tad--including a high concentration of Element 604."

Klag grinned. "A natural cloaking device."

"That's what I was thinking, sir."

Moving back to the front of the bridge, Klag said, "Leskit, set a course for the belt, and prepare to execute as soon as we decloak."

"Can't wait, sir," Leskit muttered.

Klag shook his head. Navigating an asteroid field would be hazardous, and Leskit obviously wasn't looking forward to it Aloud, he said, "And use both hands, Lieutenant. These new deckplates could do with a little blood staining

Laughter rippled through the bridge at that. With a mild scowl on his face, Leskit removed his hand from the wound on his leg, which wasn't bleeding as much, in any case.

Klag went back to his command chair. He didn't realize until after he was sitting in it that, for the first time in over a month, he sat in it normally, without taking the time to savor it.

"Decloak and fire," he said.

"Torpedoes firing," Rodek said at the same time that Leskit said, "Changing course."

With the diminishing number of foes, Toq had reduced the tactical

display to a corner of the viewscreen, leaving the bulk of the display showing a real image of the fourth vessel. As a result, it was completely unnecessary for Toq to actually say, "Fourth vessel destroyed!" because Klag saw it explode in a satisfyingly fiery conflagration. But the second officer said it anyway.

Yet another cheer rose up from the assembled crew. Toq yelled over the tumult, "Vessels two and three changing course to intercept."

Klag turned to the pilot. "Leskit?"

"They won't catch up until we're well inside the asteroid field, sir."

"Good. Rodek, fire disrupters at will as soon as they're in range."

The Gorkon moved at full impulse toward the asteroid belt. Toq changed the viewscreen image to that of the two remaining Kreel ships as they pursued.

"Entering asteroid field now, sir," Leskit said.

"Slow to one-eighth impulse, and change to an evasive course." No sense making it any easier on the Kreel, Klag thought, though they shouldn't be able to detect us in any case.

"Sir, the Kreel are entering the asteroid field and firing at random," Toq said. "The fools aren't coming anywhere near us!"

"As expected," Klag said with a nod.

"Kreel now disengaging," Toq added. "They're taking up positions outside the belt."

Toq changed the viewscreen image to give an overview of the asteroid belt. The Gorkon was a green light in the midst of several yellow lights of varying size indicating the asteroids. The two red lights indicating the Kreel ships were at different points outside the belt.

Klag sighed; he had hoped the Kreel would be foo lish enough to stick together. If they had, the Gorkon could just "appear" out of the belt and probably take both ships out. Based on the tactical display Toq provided, both ships' shields were diminished, their power output low.

Now, though, the Gorkon would only be able to pull that trick with one Kreel ship, leaving the other one free to pursue. The Gorkon could probably still take the second ship, but it would be more difficult. He could simply wait out the Kreel until the Sompek arrived.

But no--Klag had had enough of these Kreel glob flies buzzing about him. It was time he swatted them and had done with it.

Then he noticed something on the tactical display-one of the Kreel ships was within twenty thousand qell'qams of a small asteroid. If we fire a torpedo into the asteroid and detonate it when we engage the other ship, it should do sufficient damage to the Kreel ship. And Element 604 should provide camouflage for the torpedo itself.

"Bridge to engineering," Klag said.

"Kurak."

"Commander, I need a quantum torpedo to be set with a delayed detonation."

"They're not designed for that."

"That was not a request, Commander, nor was it an invitation to discuss engineering minutiae. I repeat I need a quantum torpedo to be

set with a delayed detonation."

Klag heard a nasal voice, but couldn't make out any words, then Kurak said, "One moment, Captain. I need to consult with my staff."

A bark of laughter came from the helm. "Something amuses you, Leskit?"

Klag asked.

"Not at all, sir," Leskit said quickly. "Just something caught in my throat."

Kurak came back on. "Give us a minute, Captain, and we

"II have your torpedo."

"Good. Bridge out."

Klag got up from his chair and walked to the viewscreen. The Kreel were holding position. Their shields were at ten and thirty percent, respectively. He hoped Kurak wouldn't take too long with the torpedo- that asteroid was drifting away from the second Kreel ship, and soon would be too far away to be useful.

"Captain," Rodek said, "modified torpedo is loaded and ready." Pointing at the particular asteroid, Klag said, "Fire torpedo on that asteroid, gunner. Detonate on my mark."

"Yes, sir."

"Leskit, head for the other Kreel ship, intercept course. Rodek, the moment we're in firing range, fire disrupters on them and detonate the

torpedo."

Sounding as disinterested as ever, Rodek repeated, "Yes, sir."

Klag returned to his command chair. The rest of the bridge crew was obviously caught up in the joy of the battle. Rodek, though, had all the passion of dead gagh. Klag wondered why this was.

"In weapons range," Leskit announced.

"Firing," Rodek said, "and detonating torpedo."

The timing turned out to be exquisite. Vessel number three exploded from the Gorkon's disrupter fire at virtually the same moment that the debris from the torpedo destroyed asteroid tore through the second vessel's depleted shields and ripped it to pieces.

"Victory!" Toq cried, thrusting his fist into the air, and the other officers added their voices to a cacophony of cheers.

One of the officers at an aft station started chanting, "Klag! Klag!

Klag! Klag!" Soon the others joined in, and Klag basked in the joy of an entire bridge full of warriors bellowing his name in victory.

Then Toq cried over the tumult, "Sir! Receiving a distress call!"

The chanting dimmed as Klag asked, "Source?"

"The first Kreel ship--the Glione."

Klag shook his head. "We never did reply to their initial message, did

we? It's past time we did. Leskit, change course to intercept. Rodek, blow the Kreel to Gre'thor."

In less than a minute, the Gorkon moved to within range of the first Kreel ship and fired its disrupters. The Glione went the way of the other five ships in the "fleet."

Another cheer rose. Toq started to sing, "Qoy qeylls puqlod.

Qoypuqbe'pu'." He pounded the side of his console on the alternate beats.

It was the Warrior's Anthem. Leskit and a couple of others joined Toq "yohbogh matlhboghje Suvwl'."

Soon, all the bridge crew joined in "Say'mohchu' may"

"Iw. masuv manong ' mahohchu'."

Klag noticed that it was now coming in over the speakers --it seemed they were singing all across the ship ... nl'be'ylnmaj ' wovqu'.

batlh maheghbej " qljdaq vavpu " DImuv. pa ' reh masuvtahqu'.

mamevqo'masuvtah. ma'ov.

For the first time in over six months, Klag's right arm didn't itch.

When the warriors got to the end of the song, and after the subsequent cheering had died down, Klag rose from his chair. "Lieutenant Toq."

"Sir!"

"You have command of the bridge. Set a course back to tad. Tell the Sompek that they missed the battle, and inform the ambassador that he can beam aboard at his leisure. I'll be in the medical ward." He looked at Leskit. "Lieutenant, you're with me. I believe I promised you some medical assistance."

Leskit laughed, and rose from his chair. Klag and the rest of the bridge crew joined in the laugh.

This is what it should feel like, Klag thought as he walked off the bridge to the adulation of his crew.

His crew.

Chapter Nine.

Worf glowered at the image of Minister T'Latrek on the computer screen in his quarters on the Gorkon.

Due to the distance between Earth and tad, the message from the Vulcan woman--which had arrived just as Worf returned to the Gorkon following its successful campaign against the six Kreel ships--had taken several hours to wend its way through subspace, so Worf was not able to respond directly. This was probably for the best, as his instinct was to say something that it was probably unwise to utter in front of a member of the Federation Council.

"_I_ am afraid that your suggestion of relocating the al'Hmatti to another world, while logical, is simply not practical. Under normal circumstances, the Federation would, of course, be happy to do this, but circumstances, as you are well aware, are far from that. The backlog of refugees from the Dominion War is considerable.

Relocating the al'Hmatti would require committing resources that we simply do not have."

It probably didn't matter. Emperor me'Grmat had made it clear that the al'Hmatti would not accept relocation. But now Worf wouldn't even be able to propose it.

Worf was in a bad mood. Over the last several years, he'd developed one of two habits when he got into such a mood. He'd either go to the bar--Ten-Forward on the Enterprise, Quark's on Deep Space Nine--and drown his sorrows in prune juice, or he'd go to the holodeck and kill things.

Or he'd go talk to Jadzia.

But the Gorkon didn't have a bar--a major failing in a starship, to Worf's mind--and Jadzia ... Jadzia ... Conveniently, though, the Gorkon did have a holodeck, complete with a proper calisthenics program. Worf went there, his mek'leth in hand.

"Computer, activate program. Level one."

The setting changed from the default grid to a jungle glade. Worf started moving slowly through the glade, emptying his mind, letting the sounds and scents ride toward him.

He heard a mild flapping noise. Bird. Harmless. He heard something moving through the underbrush, and the smell of leather reached his nostrils. Possible foe. He raised the mek'leth. A skeletal creature wearing leather-studded armor leapt out at him, swinging with a two-bladed axe. Worf parried easily with his mek'leth, then kicked at the creature. They parried with their weapons for several minutes.

Worf let himself fall into the rhythm of it, gauging his opponent's capabilities, waiting for the right moment to strike.

With each thrust, with each parry, his mind became less cluttered. His frustration with recent events ebbed. His irritation with Tiral, Klag, and Drex faded. His ever present anguish over Jadzia's death receded. His lingering guilt over the very existence of Rodek died down.

The instant that the opening came, Worf plowed his mek'leth into the creature's bony neck, severing the skull from its body.

That was too easy, he thought, and just that he could think that clearly meant that he needed to up the stakes. "Computer, level seven."

The skeleton creature got back up, a new skull materializing on its neck, and charged. Even as Worf parried its ax with his mek'leth, he could hear another attacker behind him.

He swiped at the skeleton creature, then swung the mek'leth in a mong'em maneuver, placing the mek'leth behind his neck to parry a blow from behind. He felt the impact of a weapon on the mek'leth, then raised his weapon in response.

In one fluid motion, he kicked at the skeleton creature's leg, shattering the bone, then turned to face the rear attacker.

An armored reptilian creature swung its mace at Worf a second time.

Again, Worf parried, this time catching the mace at its handle, forcing the attacker to lose its grip on the weapon. Disarmed, Worf easily dispatched it.

The reptilian creature's yellow ichor dripping from his mek'leth, Worf turned back to the skeleton creature, which was hobbling toward Worf, its ax raised. Worf parried the ax strike easily, but then the creature struck at his face with a bony fist. Worf reeled with the impact, struggling to keep his footing, swinging wildly with the

mek'leth. He stumbled backward a few steps right into a Nausicaan.

Evolved from similar stock to Klingons, Nausicaans were known throughout the galaxy as violent beings-some humans called them "Klingons without all that silly honor stuff." This one was large even by Nausicaan standards, and had now grabbed Worf in a bear hug.

The Nausicaan was flanked by an Argosian--a massive humanoid--and a mugato--a white-furred, horned, ape-like creature with sharp claws and poisonous fangs. The Argosian, mugato, and skeleton creature all moved in on Worf, the latter still limping.

Worf bent his knees, then straightened them quickly, thrusting himself and the Nausicaan backward. The Nausicaan bent over backward, and for a moment, Worf was perpendicular to the ground. He kicked at the approaching Argosian and mugato with each boot; the mugato barely noticed the impact, but Worf caught the Argosian right in the nose, breaking it, and sending bone fragments into the alien's brain. Death was instantaneous.

The Nausicaan loosened its grip for only a moment as it tried to straighten back up, but that was all Worf needed. He broke out of the grip, whirled, and slashed at the Nausicaan with his mek'leth, then crouched in a defensive position.

The mugato and the Nausicaan both charged, the mugato slashing with its claws, the Nausicaan punching with a massive fist.

Worf raised his arms to defend from the attacks--the mugato drawing blood, the Nausicaan badly bruising Worf's right arm, possibly spraining it--then slashed at the mugato with his mek'leth. Worf then dove and rolled, coming up right where the skeleton creature was making its slow advance. He thrust his mek'leth into the creature's ribs, then hoisted the surprised creature, using the mek'leth hilt as a handle. He swung the creature around, clubbing both the Nausicaan and the mugato in the head with the creature's legs. He then swung the mek'leth hilt like a human baseball bat against a large tree; the skeleton creature shattered inside its armor.

The blood lust surged within Worf. The bouquet of the yellow ichor on his mek'leth, the blood from his arm wound, the scent of the creatures before him, and even the smell of the venom on the mugato's fangs all washed over him, intoxicating him.

The smells of battle.

This time, he did not quiet the cry of his Klingon heart. He gave it full reign.

The Nausicaan's rounded mouth opened and said, "Die, Klingon!"

Worf's only answer wab a growl that started in the base of his throat and quickly evolved into a warrior's scream. He charged at the Nausicaan and struck, severing the alien's right arm. If there was any irony in giving the Nausicaan an identical wound to that of Klag, it was buried deep, for Worf did not even acknowledge it. He simply pressed the attack, slashing at the Nausicaan's chest, head, and remaining arm until the Nausicaan was dead. The Nausicaan had managed to get in a blow to Worf's head with its remaining fist. The Klingon's vision swam momentarily, but he forged ahead, ignoring the pain.

As soon as Worf struck the killing blow, the mugato hit him from the side, knocking the wind from him--and, more importantly, knocking the mek'leth from his grip.

Worf and the mugato rolled on the ground for several turns until the mugato pressed down upon him and moved to bite Worf with its poisonous fangs. Though pain still echoed inside his skull from the Nausicaan's blow, he still managed to head-butt the white-furred beast on its snout Having briefly distracted the mugato, Worf rolled it off him, then punched it repeatedly in the face. Long past the point where it was stunned into insensibility, Worf finally stopped, retrieved his mek'leth, and cut the mugato's head off.

Then the Brikar attacked.

It took most of an hour for Worf to subdue the Brikar, and then only by using a tree that the Brikar himself had uprooted and tried to club Worf to death with. Worf managed to impale the Brikar on one of the larger branches.

After that, it was a pair of Andorians. Then a Chalnoth. And then, finally, a large avian creature that swooped down on Worf with its massive wings. Worf defeated it by severing one set of pinfeathers with his mek'leth, causing its flight to become erratic. After that, it was a comparatively simple matter to stab it in each of its hearts.

Worf was now covered in blood, feathers, hair, and bone fragments. He had cuts and bruises all over him.

He felt better than he had in weeks. The blood lust started to abate slowly.

"Impressive work," came a voice from behind him.

Worf whirled around and charged with his mek'leth at the voice. The rational part of him--which was only just now returning to his conscious mind--registered that this was Giancarlo Wu, his aide, and that disemboweling him after less than two weeks on the job was bad form.

But that was still a very small, very recessive part of his mind at the moment. He charged at the hapless aide the same way he had charged at the other creatures.

Wu, for his part, made no attempt to move or defend himself .

Just as Worf was about to strike a killing blow, a bat'leth seemed to

materialize in Wu's hands to parry it. The sound of the metal blades clashing, the sight of the gore that encrusted the mek'leth being dislodged surprised Worf, and served to bring his rational side even closer to dominance.

Angered, Worf swung again, and once again Wu parried with the ease of an expert. He parried two more strikes. By the fifth strike, Worf's blood lust had more or less completely receded, replaced by a much more intellectual outrage. It was a matter of pride as much as anything.

Worf was, after all, a champion bat'leth fighter, and he was no slouch with the smaller mek'leth, either.

Wu moved with a surprising speed and grace, but Worf was now seeing a pattern. If Wu followed true to form, he would use Kilog's gambit next.

Worf swung and, sure enough, Wu countered with Kilog. This pleased Worf greatly, as Kilog was almost always followed by B'Arq's defense.

Penetrating B'Arq's defense was nearly impossible.

With an underhanded swing, Worf penetrated Wu's use of B'Arq's defense, knocking the bat'leth out of Wu's hands and putting the mek'leth to the human's throat.

"Give me one reason why I should not kill you."

With remarkable calm, Wu said, "I have a report to give, sir, and it's rather important, or I wouldn't have interrupted your session. You can gut me like a fish after I've given it."

Worf stood with his mek'leth at Wu's neck for several seconds.

"A compelling argument," he said, removing the mek'leth from Wu's throat. In truth, he had no intention of killing Wu--on the contrary, he'd enjoyed the work out with his aide as much as he had fighting the program's creatures.

A live opponent was so much more thrilling after all, and his presence served as a bridge to bring him slowly back to himself. But he had wanted to gauge the human's reaction. "Computer," he said, "end program."

The setting, and gore covering Worf's mek'leth, disappeared. To Worf's surprise, the bat'leth remained.

"I had no idea you were proficient in the bat'leth," Worf said.

As he retrieved the weapon from the deck, Wu said, "Kind of an occupational necessity. Besides, nobody ever expects me to know how to handle it, so it throws them off guard when I do. Certainly worked on you, sir," Wu added with a smile. "I had no idea you--or anyone else-could penetrate B'Arq's defense. Especially with a mek'leth."

"Only one person has done it in twenty years, that I am aware of."

"Well, two now," Wu said.

"No. My doing so six years ago was the primary reason for my championship standing in the bat'leth. I recently adapted the maneuver for the mek'leth, though th is is the first time I have tested it against a live opponent."

"Glad to be of service, sir."

Worf and Wu departed the holodeck, Krevor--who had been at her post outside the holodeck during Worf's exercise--following silently

behind.

"You said you had a report."

"Yes. First of all, I'm sorry to inform you that Emperor me'Grmat XIX is dead. He died in his sleep, apparently."

"Appropriate," Worf said.

"Really, sir?" Wu sounded surprised. "I have to confess I hadn't expected such a reaction from you."

"It is what the emperor wanted. Indeed, me'Grmat may now be the only person on tad who has gotten precisely what he wanted."

"Ah. Well, in any event, there's apparently a traditional mourning period of three days before the new one is announced, so Governor Tiral will probably wait until then." They arrived at their quarters. Krevor took up her position outside the door as they entered. Wu continued "The other thing is something I've noticed in compiling reports. After you told me what the governor had said about the increase in production, I decided to take another look at the actual figures--specifically with relation to the empire's other sources of top aline I mean, it's all well and good to improve one's own work, but we hadn't really looked at it in the context of the whole, as it were. There are presently three domestic sources for top aline and two primary sources from which the empire imports it. However, even with the governor's increase, tab is presently fifth of five on the list of top aline providers."

"Fifth?"

Wu nodded. "It's not only behind the other two domestic sources, it's still bringing in less than either the Yridians or the Capellans." He showed Worf his padd. "I did a projection on what effect the loss of tad's top aline production would have on the empire. It is, to say the

least, negligible. It might require increasing the amount imported from either the Capellans or the Yridians, but neither would be a major hardship--especially if you factor in the reduction of costs on tad if the empire gives it up." He replaced the padd inside his vest pocket and took a deep breath. "If I may be blunt, sir, the empire doesn't need this world. Is there any way to convince the High Council to let the athmatti have it and be done with it?"

Worf shook his head. "The empire needs the unrest to end, but not at the cost of appearing weak. Ma rtok specifically said that he cannot allow--"

And then it came to him.

"Allow what, sir?" Wu prompted.

Worf sat at the desk. "Martok's exact words were, "Under no circumstances can I allow tad to be ruled by anyone other than Klingons.""

"I don't understand."

"Worf to engineering."

"Vail."

"Lieutenant, I need a connection to Chancellor Martok on Qo'nos immediately."

"Yes, sir. Give me two minutes." Wu smiled. "That was a lot easier than the last time."

"Indeed. I would hate to think I was losing my touch."

Rubbing his neck, which had a spot of red from where Worf had held the mek'leth, Wu said, "No danger of that, sir. Ah, won't you want to clean yourself up before speaking with the chancellor?"

"Why?" Worf asked, confused.

"Oh, no reason, sir," Wu said with a sigh.

B'Oraq was setting a bekk's arm when Klag entered the medical ward--the captain recognized the young man as one of the guards. The patient stood at attention when he saw Klag come in.

"It's all right, Bekk," Klag said. "Doctor, when you're finished with him, I will speak with you."

"Of course, Captain."

Klag went to B'Oraq's desk and waited while she finished setting the arm. The bekk nodded to the captain and left without saying a word.

"So, Captain, what can I do for you? Oh, before I forget," B'Oraq added, tugging on her braid, "fine work suturing Lieutenant Leskit's wound. I only had to redo about three-quarters of it. Another five or six years, and you might make a decent doctor."

Klag frowned. "Your sarcasm is inappropriate, Doctor. I made Leskit a promise in front of the crew--I could not go back on my word."

"Of course not, Captain. However, I can't help but remember something the human instructors at Starfleet Medical Academy used to say about ship captains. "They don't expect you to tell them how to run the ship, so don't let them tell you how to diagnose a patient.""

"I'll keep that in mind in the future, Doctor. If you're quite finished, we have matters to discuss."

Sitting on the other side of her desk, B'Oraq said, "Of course. We've only suffered one casualty since we last left Qo'nos--Lieutenant M'Rep--but his blood type doesn't match."

"M'Rep was an engineer. I want a warrior."

B'Oraq tugged at her braid again. "You said you would be making that determination, Captain. I am simply looking for a biological match. In any case, I checked the medical records on tad. Two of the Klingons who died in the attack on the refinery are compatible --at least from my perspective." She called up something on her computer terminal, then turned the display toward Klag. "Now you must decide if they are from yours."

The captain stared at the screen. The first record was for one of the supervisors, a man named Kori. Although he came from the most noble of Houses--he was the brother, ironically, of the captain of the Sompek--Kori himself was a fat, indolent worm. From all accounts, he served well at his post in the refinery, but he was hardly worthy of having his arm continue to serve in this manner. The other was for an engineer named Takus. At first, Klag was going to dismiss him out of hand, but men he noticed the man's record. He had served in the Defense Force for many years, and had even received the General Koord Medal of Honor during a border skirmish with the Romulans fifteen years earlier. And, ironically, his right arm was about all mat was left intact of him, as he had been in the center of the refinery explosion, working until th e last second to try to defuse the bomb.

But then Klag came to why Takus had left the Defense Force apparently, mere'd been some kind of scandal involving a woman under his command.

The details were not in the record, but Klag had seen enough euphemistic records to know the signs. Takus had left the Defense Force in disgrace, though he avoided censure to his House.

According to the records, Takus was of the House of K'Tal--which meant he was a relative of Kargan's.

Under no circumstances will I place anything related to that petaq on my person.

"Neither of these are acceptable," he said aloud, turning th e terminal screen back toward B'Oraq.

Tugging on her braid some more, me doctor said, "Captain, I fail to see what difference any of this makes. These are just empty shells. Then hearts have gone on to the afterlife. What does it matter what they did in life when the spirit that inhabited them is long departed? Your spirit will inhabit this limb, regardless of who had it before."

Klag shook his head. "I do not expect you to understand."

"Good, because I don't."

Searching his mind for an appropriate simile, Klag finally said, "It would be as if you brought me the arm of Duras or General Chang or some other traitor to the empire--or as if you gave me the weapon that Morath used to fight Kahless. I would not want the stigma of their dishonor, even if it is secondhand."

B'Oraq turned the computer terminal back toward Klag. "Takus is--was an engineer who died trying to save lives. Are you saying that he's the equivalent of a Ha

"Dlbahvke Duras?"

"Only in terms of worthiness to live on in me."

Leaning back, B'Oraq tugged at her braid again. "Something else you should be aware of, Captain you do realize what you're opening yourself up to here, don't you? The war changed a lot of attitudes--if it hadn't, this medical ward would be half the size and a quarter as well equipped as it is now. But still, this step you're taking is a big one. I personally think it's the wrong step, but just by replacing a lost limb, you're flying in the face of tradition. It could have an adverse effect on how people react to you."

"Doctor, yesterday in the holodeck, I realized that possessing only one arm is having an adverse effect on my ability as a warrior. Ultimately, that is my only concern. How " react to me is their problem."

Klag hoped he sounded more convincing than he actually felt.

"Worfto Klag."

Klag frowned. "Klag."

"_I_ need to speak with you immediately in your office."

"I'll be there shortly." He looked at B'Oraq. "Continue the search, Doctor."

"What should I tell people when they ask why I am looking for these items? I told them on tad that I needed cadavers for medical research, but I doubt that I will be able to use that excuse on a wider search."

Klag was amazed at the question. "You will tell them the truth, Doctor-- that you are operating under orders from your commanding officer. That is all that you will need to say."

As Klag turned to leave, B'Oraq said, "Captain?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you. I know you're doing this for yourself and not for me--especially since you're not going about it the way I would recommend--but the fact that you are doing it means a lot to me. Having the Hero of Marcan accept a medical procedure such as this will have a profound impact on the future of Klingon medicine, I think."

"As you said, Doctor, I am not doing this for you." He smiled. "But you're welcome."

B'Oraq returned the smile, and Klag turned and left.

He headed to his office, trying very hard to convince himself that he had done the right thing. It felt right, certainly --and the memory of the constant defeats at the hands of the holographic Jem'Hadar reinforced it. On the other hand, he just won a rather impressive battle against six Kreel ships in which the number of his arms was irrelevant.

One thing was for sure--he would not graft one of those machines onto his body. The very idea made him ill. It would be the arm of a warrior or no arm at all.

B'Oraq was right about one thing, however there were many who would shun him, and call his behavior dishonorable and not worthy of Kahless.

On the other hand, if they wanted to be so damn worthy, they shouldn't be using disruptors. After all, just a bat'leth was good enough for Kahless ... Upon entering his office, he saw Lieutenant Vail kneeling in front of an opened wall panel. "Lieutenant?"

Vail shot to his feet

"My apologies, sir, I did not-That is, I need to work on this panel."

"Do you have to do this now, Lieutenant?"

"I--I'm afraid so, sir. If I do not, all the power to the bridge and the three decks below will go out"

"Fine, Lieutenant, keep at it."

As Klag went to sit at his desk and Vail went back to his repair work, Worf entered, his aide behind nun.

"Ambassador," Klag said.

"Captain," Worf returned with a nod. "I believe I may have found a solution to the difficulties on tad."

Klag blinked. "That is good news, Ambassador. I assume you'll share it with me when Governor Tirol arrives."

"No. I wished to discuss the plan with you, first."

This consideration surprised Klag. "I am flattered, Ambassador, but this is your mission. I doubt I could provide any useful aid."

Worf smirked that tiny smirk of his. "Your modesty is ill-timed, Captain, and unconvincing. You have, in fact, questioned my ability from almost the very moment we met"

"So now you ask for my advice so I can either prove myself right or wrong."

"Yes."

Klag threw his head back and laughed. "I admire your audacity, son of Mogh. Very well, tell me your plan."

"Since we arrived, there has been a disparity between the importance given this mission by Martok when we spoke on the Sword of Kahless and the reality of the situation on tad. This is an inhospitable world run by a fool on a satellite, providing a service to the empire that it does not need."

"Topaline is a necessity, Ambassador," Klag said.

Worf's human aide stepped forward and handed Klag a padd. "Not tad's top aline sir. If you'll look at these figures"

K lag glanced at the chart on the padd's display. Not only was tad the fifth most productive of the empire's five sources of top aline it was a distant fifth. "Interesting. However, our esteemed chancellor did point out--"

"I was there, Captain," Worf said calmly, "I am aware of what he said.

His exact words were "Under no circumstances can I allow tad to be ruled by anyone other than Klingons.""

Klag didn't remember the words that precisely, but that sounded right.

"Which means--"

"Which means," Worf, "that the death of the emperor gives us a way to fulfill Martok's conditions and still satisfy everyone."

"How?"

"Install a Klingon as the new emperor of tad."

Klag frowned. "I don't understand."

"This world is not worth committing the resources to properly put down the rebels. It has not been worth the High Council's attention to commit any resources to even address the problem. When they finally did, they used a technicality to turn the problem over to a Federation ambassador. The entire reason for not simply giving up the planet is to maintain appearances. The empire cannot be perceived to be giving in to the rebels because of the precedent it sets. Yet the world is not worth keeping."

"Hence your insurmountable problem."

"Not at all. Since the problem is cosmetic, so is the solution.

Appoint a Klingon as the new emperor. Phase Governor Tiral and his people out so that it will appear that tad is still part of the empire to everyone else."

"So the truth of what is happening must be kept secret?"

Worf nodded.

Klag rubbed his chin. "I can't believe the al'Hmatti will accede to this. It will give the perception that they are still jeghpu'wf."

"I doubt that they will care," Worf said. "They are only interested in their own freedom. When they appealed to outsiders for help, they

saw no real distinction between asking for help from the Federation or from the Kreel."

At the very mention of the Kreel, Klag spit

"I don't know if that proves they're uncaring, but it certainly proves that they are ignorant."

"It is simply a matter of perspective, Captain. They applied to the Federation for help when they were enemies of the empire after the invasion of Cardassia. When no help was forthcoming, they simply went to another of the empire's enemies."

Klag shrugged. "I suppose. To be honest, Ambassador, this would not be my first choice for a plan. However, my first choice would probably be to obliterate the planet altogether. Then again, based on the report B'Oraq filed regarding the injuries you and Bekk Krevor suffered, the al'Hmatti are not unworthy warriors, and deserve a better death than that." Smiling, he added, "Besides, I can't imagine the Federation supporting such an action."

"No."

"So, since my plan is untenable, I think yours is a fine one."

"Thank you."

"This, of course, leaves the question as to who to appoint as emperor.

I take it you don't find Tiral to be a worthy candidate?"

"Hardly," Worf said with distaste.

"I agree." Klag had another suggestion, but he wasn't sure it would go over well with Worf. "Perhaps we could request a volunteer from the crew."

Suddenly, a nasal voice said, "Uh, sir?"

Klag turned sharply. He had momentarily forgotten Van's presence.

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"With all due respect, sir, I'd like to volunteer."

"You?"

Vail nodded.

"Why you?"

Vail shifted from foot to foot. "I do not believe there is room for me to advance here, sir. I have made many suggestions for improving the prowess of this great ship, but the only ones Commander Kurak has allowed me to implement were in the heat of battle." Klag frowned.

"What do you mean?"

"I--I was the one who conquered the energy distribution nodes to provide us with extra shield power during both battles against the foul Kreel." Vail hesitated, then spit for effect. Klag tried not to roll his eyes. "You see, I was able to shunt power from the holodeck using a device that I--"

"Yes, yes." Klag feared that Vail would go on at obscene length regarding his accomplishments. It was like a sickness with these

engineering types. Get them started on something technical, and they babbled like humans. "And you say Commander Kurak has been unwilling to allow any upgrades?"

"I do not wish to speak ill of my commanding officer," Vail said quickly and nervously. "If that is how she wishes to command, that is her prerogative. This is a very impressive ship, put together by some of the finest engineers in the empire, and I can see why she would trust the finest engineers in the empire before she would trust me."

How did this Grishnar cat live this long in the Defense Force? Klag wondered. "So you wish to volunteer for this duty, because you feel it's the best way for you to advance your career?"

"Perhaps not directly, sir, but-Honestly, sir, I am not much of a fighter."

"That much is obvious," Worf muttered, and Klag had to concur.

"I had hoped that my accomplishments as an engineer might make up for that--that my prowess in defeating the problems faced by engineers on a starship would overcome my deficiencies fighting foes on a battlefield.

However --realistically, sir, I am not sure that that can last Volunteering for this assignment gives me the chance to do something for the empire. I assume I will not truly be emperor, yes, Ambassador?"

"The position would be largely ceremonial," Worf said with a nod. "Its primary function would be to create the illusion of power. You would act as the head of state to the galaxy at large, and write regular reports, but your power would be--negligible."

"That is fine!" Vail said, gesturing in an inane manner. "I do not seek power! I only seek the glory that I can get through my work! And if I

am a ceremonial emperor, I will have plenty of time to conquer some conundra that I have confronted of late. For one thing, there were some difficulties with the converter I used to dump holodeck power into the engines. This would give me the time to give that foe the attention it deserves."

Klag shook his head. On the one hand, it was an ideal solution to the problem of Vail--after all, he thought, just look at him. It's an embarrassment to have him on my ship. It's better for everyone if he's exiled to some backwater ice-world.

On the other hand, it seemed he was more or less directly responsible for keeping the Gorkon intact long enough for Klag to triumph over the Kreel. He wasn't sure he wanted to lose so valued an officer.

"Kuraktovall"

The voice startled Vail. He let out a yelp and dropped the tool he was holding.

Then again, Klag thought, perhaps we're well to be rid of him.

"V-V-VVVall."

"Haven't you finished the damned repairs yet?"

"Uh, yes, Commander, I--I have, but--"

Klag was curious as to how Vail was going to explain his way out of this, but Worf came to his rescue.

"Commander, this is Ambassador Worf. Lieutenant Vail is presently in conference with myself and Captain Klag. We will return him to duty as soon as we are finished."

There was a pause. "Very well. Out."

Worf turned to Vail. "This plan has the approval of Chancellor Martok and, naturally, of the Federation."

"Why naturally?" Klag asked. "You haven't sent any communique's to the Federation since you returned from the surface." Turning back to Klag, Worf said, "Captain, I am the Federation as far as this mission is concerned. I do not need to beg for approval. My decision in this matter is final. That is my job." Klag said nothing.

Worf looked back at Vail. "In any case, it still needs to be brought before Governor Tiral and the al'Hmatti. With your permission, Captain," Worf said with a glance back at Klag, "I would like to have that meeting on the Gorkon."

"Fine."

Worf peered down at Vail--the ambassador was a head taller than the lieutenant--and fixed him with a penetrating gaze. "Are you sure, Lieutenant, that this is what you wish?"

"Yes, sir! I am!"

"Very well. We shall meet in the wardroom in two hours."

Worf then left, his aide trailing silently behind.

Vail twisted his hands around nervously. "I, ah, I suppose I should be getting back to engineering, sir."

"That would be a good idea. But, Lieutenant?" Klag added as Vail

turned to leave.

"Yes, sir?"

"Don't tell Commander Kurak--or anyone else--of what was discussed in this room until I give the order, is that understood?"

Nodding so hard Klag feared his head might fall off, Vail said, "Yes, sir! You can count on me, sir."

Then he left.

Shaking his head, Klag got up to head for the bridge.

"Toq to Klag."

"Klag."

"Captain, you have received a personal message from the Homeworld. It is tagged as urgent."

Frowning, Klag sat back down at his desk. "Route it to me here, Lieutenant"

"Yes, sir."

Klag played the message.

When it was over, he played it again.

M'Raq, son of K'Ton, former commander in the Klingon Defense Force

and father to Captain Klag, had died in his sleep.

Just, Klag thought with revulsion, like that jeghpu'wl' emperor.

It was finally over.

Thirty years of noble service to the empire, followed by over a decade of disgrace.

M'Raq--and the rest of the family--had long since given up imploring Klag to visit the old man on Qo'nos. Klag had found his father's behavior incomprehensible, and would not see him. He wouldn't even set foot in the family's home in the First City for as long as his father remained alive, because, to Klag's mind, he had brought dishonor upon them.

The High Council hadn't seen it that way. Those thirty years of noble service outweighed the years that followed, and M'Raq had never been officially censured.

Not that it mattered to Klag. Years ago on the Pagh, he had said to Riker, when the human was aghast at Klag's insistence on not visiting his own father, "A Klingon is his work, not his family. That is the way of things." He was a soldier of the empire. M'Raq may have forgotten what that meant, but the son of M'Raq swore he never would. Even as his father disgraced the family, Klag would keep the family's honor. That was why he had stuck it out for ten years under Kargan's boot, because he knew that someday he would triumph.

And he had. He was a hero. He would be inducted into the Order of the Bat'leth. He had a fine ship under his command.

The only thing he didn't have was a right arm.

Suddenly, Klag reared his head back and laughed.

He continued laughing for several minutes.

"Klag to B'Oraq," he said when he had recovered enough breath to speak.

"B'Oraq."

"Doctor, those biological requirements for transplanting a new arm--would a member of my family qualify?"

"Almost definitely. Why?"

Klag firmly believed that M'Raq's spirit was headed straight for the Barge of the Dead in Gre'thor. He knew it in his warrior's heart.

Unless Klag did something about it. Perhaps, Father, I can regain for you what you could not be bothered to regain for yourself.

"I believe I have found a donor on Qo'nos."

"This is outrageous!" Governor Tiral screamed. "I will not allow you to do this to me!"

Worf tried hard not to sigh, and did not entirely succeed. He had hoped Tiral's reaction would be a bit less emotional. He hadn't expected it, but he had hoped. To be fair, Tiral had been silent--fuming, but silent--while Worf outlined his proposal. In fact, Tiral spent most of the meeting glowering at re'Trenat and em'Rlakun, whom Worf had invited.

Also present were Worf, Wu, Klag, Drex, Vail --nervously fidgeting in his chair, of course--and Tiral, all seated around the table. Standing at

one end of the room were the two al'Hmatti, who could not fit in the wardroom chairs. At the opposite end of the room, against the wall, were Tiral's guards, Klag's guard, and Krevor. Krevor had cut her hair short so that it was again all of an equal length.

The governor continued to rant

"I will not stand for this!"

Contradicting this statement, he rose from his seat and glowered at Worf, his gray eyes smoldering. "I will not allow you to take this planet away from me. And you!" he added, turning his gaze upon Klag.

"Is this how you fulfill your promise to me?"

Klag, for his part, looked completely unperturbed. "I told you once, Governor, and I will repeat, that I did precisely what I promised--a good word with the High Council."

Pointing a pudgy finger at the captain, Tiral cried, "Make whatever feeble excuses you wish, Captain, but I can assure you that you will regret what you have done!"

"Commander Drex," Klag said.

"Sir!"

"Make an appointment for me for three weeks hence."

Drex tapped some commands into the console in front of him. "And the nature of the appointment, sir?"

"Set aside five minutes for me to be worried about the governor's threat."

"Tiral snarled, unsheathed a tik'leth--similar to an Earth long sword--from a scabbard under his vest, and ran toward Klag.

Krevor and Klag's own guard moved to block him. Undaunted, Tiral swung his tik'leth. Krevor blocked the strike with her arm and then punched the governor in the stomach--the most obvious target. Klag's guard grabbed Tiral's arm and slammed it into his knee, loosening Tiral's grip on the tik'leth. With a quick motion, the guard relieved Tiral of the sword, while Krevor pushed him away. Worf noticed abrasions on Tiral's armor where Krevor had punched him, but the blades in her gauntlets had not penetrated the leather.

Tiral's two guards stepped forward, their disrupters raised. Krevor and Klag's guard responded in kind. They stood facing each other, each ready to kill the others. Blood stained Krevor's sleeve where the tik'leth had struck.

"Enough!" Klag cried, standing up. "Stand fast, all of you!"

"With respect, sir," Klag's guard said, "I will when they do."

Tiral gestured to his guards, who lowered their pistols. Only then did Krevor and Klag's guard do Likewise. Klag's guard even offered Tiral his tik'leth back.

Ignoring the offer, Tiral instead turned his corpulent form toward Worf. "I do not acknowledge your authority over me, Ambassador. I will go to the High Council!"

"The same High Council that you have been appealing to for months?" Tiral said nothing, though he looked Like he had just swallowed dead rocht.

Worf did not let up. "The same High Council that said it would abide by my decision in this matter? The same High Council that has already approved my proposal?"

Tiral snarled. "Damn you ..."

Worf stood up and took the tik'leth from Klag's guard and held it before Tiral. "The purpose of this meeting, Governor, was to provide you with information, not to invite debate.

The decision has already been made. All that is left for you is to decide whether to face this news honorably."

Tiral snatched the sword out of Worf's hands and held it to Worf's neck. Worf did not budge.

"You may, of course, try to kill me," Worf said calmly. "But I doubt that will do much for your future prospects. Especially since there are people in this room who will die to protect me."

Still holding the sword to Worf's neck, Tiral said in a whisper, "Do you realize what you have done? It is not enough that you are replacing me with that todsah over there." He indicated Vail with a jerk of his head. "But there are people on tad, Ambassador--people who have dedicated their lives to the mines down there, to bringing top aline to the empire. Some have died for it! And now they are having their lives uprooted in order to accommodate the wishes of jeghpu ".

What am I to tell them, Ambassador?"

"That they are serving the empire."

"They serve the empire now." Tiral pushed the sword closer. Worf felt the blade press against his skin.

"And they have done so, well. But now is the time to find another way to serve." Again, Tiral snarled--he seemed inordinately fond of the sound. He did not press his attack, but he did not relent in it, either.

"Governor," said Klag's voice from behind Worf, "if you wish to live to ever get off this ship, I suggest you back away from the ambassador right now."

Worf gazed past Tiral for a moment, and saw that Klag, Krevor, Klag's guard, and even Drex and Vail all had disrupters trained on Tiral. Tiral's guards looked uncertainly at each other, not sure what to do. The two al'Hmatti seemed amused as they watched from against the wall.

Tiral lowered his tik'leth. "You are all fools," he said.

Then he turned and left the room as fast as his girth would allow. His guards followed quickly behind.

Worf turned to Klag. "Your support is appreciated, Captain." Klag smiled. "Yes, well--whether or not one respects the person, one must respect the office. Now, come," he said, putting his lone arm around Van's shoulders, "we must prepare this young man for his new career."

Epilogue

"YOU WISHED TO SEE ME, CAPTAIN?"

Klag looked up from his desk to see Drex. "Yes, Commander, I did."

Klag set down the padd on which he'd been writing his mission report Worf had spent the last day in contact with both Qo'nos and the athmatti, to arrange the transfer of power. The ambassador also made an effort to find new positions for the displaced Klingon staff--which had surprised Tiral, as he hadn't expected such consideration from a man he'd tried to kill. Some of the staff would remain behind to aid Vail, and retain the illusion that the empire still ran tad. The satellite would be decommissioned and all operations relocated to the planet--ostensibly, in order to keep the rebels in line.

Klag very much wanted to fold his hands together. He'd always found that gesture intimidating, and he looked forward to being able to do it again. B'Oraq had been in touch with Klag's family, and M'Raq's body was being put in stasis pending the Gorkon's return to drop off the ambassador. The procedure would begin as soon as possible after their arrival.

Until then, Klag had to settle for simply gazing upon Drex. "I'd like to talk to you about your future."

"My future is honor," Drex said in a rote manner.

"Perhaps it will be. I certainly hope so. But it won't be on this ship."

Drex looked confused. "Sir?"

Klag picked up the padd he was working on, as well as another that sat on his desk. Fanning them so they were both visible, he held them up so Drex could see them. "I have two reports here, Commander. One is a report on the mission to tad. The other is a crew evaluation.

"In the first, you come across very well. It mentions how instrumental you were in locating the rebel base, and also some words Tiral spoke regarding the skillful performance of your duties as his temporary attache"."

"I'm gratified to hear that, sir."

In a low, dangerous voice, Klag said, "I did not give you leave to speak, Commander." Drex said nothing, but stood up straighten

Klag went on. "The second report is different. The first officer's job is to serve the captain, but stand for the crew. You have done little of either. Your battle drills have been uninspired, you have taken no initiative. On more than one occasion you needed to be reminded of your duty. Kegren's incompetence and Van's dissatisfaction should either have come to my attention much sooner--or never should have come to my att ention at all."

"Van's--"

"_I_ did not give you leave to speak, Commander!"

This time a scowl darkened Drex's face, but he said nothing.

Klag got up from behind his desk and started walking to the other side of it. "Do you know that I was not allowed to choose my own crew? The price I had to pay for my first command being so exalted a post.

Command chose for me. And I have to say that the choices were not ones I would have made. An incompetent second officer who needed to be removed. A passionless gunner. An eccentric pilot. A chief engineer who doesn't seem to value innovation. A radical chief medical officer.

And you. Not exactly the stuff that songs are made of."

Klag stood next to Drex. The first officer stared straight ahead.

"But in battle--oh, in battle, it all came together. True, the opponents

were mere Kreel, but we were outnumbered six to one. And we triumphed. We were like the warriors of old. And who was absent from this grand victory? Who was the one member of the crew who did not participate in this glorious fight?"

Drex looked like he wanted to say something, but knew better than to tempt Klag's wrath a third time.

"I cannot point to any one thing and prove your incompetence. Unlike Kegren or that engineer that Kurak dealt with, you have not endangered the ship. But I can say with absolute certainty that you did not receive this commission due to your skills. Like our friend the ambassador, you have the chancellor to thank for your position."

Now Drex looked like he was ready to explode. But, to his credit, he remained silent.

"But unlike the ambassador," Klag said, and now he spoke almost right into Drex's ear, "I have no reason to believe that you might rise above the nepotism." He walked back around to his desk. "I cannot justify removing you from this post. I can, however, give you a promotion."

Drex's scowl was now leavened by a look of confusion.

"I could challenge you--but even if I win, I lose. You are the chancellor's son, and there would be dire consequences, especially since I don't truly have cause. But I spent a decade serving under a fool who was promoted through family, and I'm damned if my first officer will be the same way." He dropped the two pad ds and picked up a third. "As it happens, a solution has presented itself. Governor Tiral has been reassigned to supervise the weapons development facility on Hudyuq. They also need a liaison officer to the fleet that patrols that sector. Tiral speaks well of you, and it is obvious that, while you are not suited to the task of first officer, you work well in administration. Therefore," and now Klag read off the padd, "effective on this, the two hundred and third day in the year of Kahless, 1001, you are hereby relieved of all duties on board the Gorhon and assigned to serve on Hudyuq. You report to Captain Ch'Targh in two

days."

He handed Drex the padd. The commander looked at it as if it were a tribble, then finally took it

"You still retain the rank of commander, but you now have far greater responsibilities. Congratulations on the new post, Commander. Now get off my ship."

"Captain--"

"You have been dismissed, Commander!"

Drex nodded. "Very well." He left without another word.

Less than a minute later, the door chime rang again. "Enter," Klag said, and the door rolled aside to let Kurak in. She had a put-upon look on her face, and gripped her left wrist with her right hand. "Commander, I wish to speak to you about Lieutenant Vail."

"The lieutenant has been reassigned," she said, sounding confused.

"Yes. And it is the reasons why he volunteered for the reassignment that I wished to discuss."

"I don't understand."

Klag leaned back in his chair. "Vail informs me that you were discouraging him from improving the ship's systems. He also informs me that he was responsible for the additional power we received during both firefights with the Kreel."

"All of this has been entered in my logs, as well as Van's, sir," Kurak

said impatiently.

"I wish to know why you have behaved in this manner."

"My task, Captain, is to keep this ship functioning. Improving ship's systems is a mandate for shipbuilders and repair crews, not on-site crew."

"Wrong, Commander. Your task is to follow my orders. And my orders are for you to reconsider your position."

Kurak's lip curled upward. "Captain, I have my own way of doing things. I've been doing it with no difficulty since I joined the Defense Force. If you do not like that way, you can find another chief engineer and transfer me to another ship."

Throwing his head back, Klag laughed. "Do you imagine I take that kindly to my orders being flouted, Commander? Oh, I may well find myself another chief engineer, but I have no reason to transfer you.

The ship's first officer, assistant chief engineer, and pilot are all transfer ring off already. No, if I find that I'm dissatisfied with your performance as chief engineer, I will have no choice but to demote you.

Since Leskit is returning to the Rotor ran, perhaps I'll make you the new pilot"

"Captain--" Kurak started, then cut herself off. Her grip on her left wrist tightened. "I will do as you suggest."

"Good. Dismissed."

Kurak turned to leave, then whirled back as the door opened.

"Lieutenant Leskit is transferring back to the Rotarran?"

"His assignment here was always temporary, Commander. I assumed you were aware of that"

"No." The word carried significant weight.

Klag shook his head as Kurak left, grateful that he wasn't Leskit just at the moment. He called up the requisition he'd been working on for a new chief engineer and erased it. Perhaps he'd need it eventually, but not today.

Drex sat at the console for several minutes before he finally put the communication through. It was on the most secure frequency in the empire, a direct line to the chancellor that even the rest of the High Council didn't have.

Being the son of the head of the Council has its privileges, he thought bitterly.

The face that appeared on the viewscreen a moment later still gave Drex pause. He wasn't sure why the scar tissue that had replaced Martok's left eye so moved him. Maybe it was because he feared that one day the eye would be there again, signaling that the changeling had returned to steal his father's life away.

But no, that creature died on Ty'Gokor. Gowron showed me the recording of the event himself. Dozens of warriors fired on it with disrupters set on maximum. It couldn't have survived.

"Father," he said to the image.

"Drex. It is good to see you."

"And you as well, Father." Martok said, "_I_ understand from Worf that the mission to tad ended well."

"It ended. Father, Klag has transferred me to Hudyuq. I am to be the fleet liaison." Drex tried to sound outraged, but he feared he sounded petulant. He had spent years trying to get that tone out of his voice, but he had never quite done it to his own satisfaction. "It isn't enough that I was denied command of this ship--now the man who took my rightful place from me is sending me away to some other world. How can I prove my worthiness as a fleet liaison?"

Martok leaned into the viewer. "If Captain Klag feels your skills would be better suited to Hudyuq, my son, then I will not argue with him. And if you object to the transfer, then you should do so through proper channels. I will not have you using the fact that you're my son for your own benefit. If there is nothing else?"

Drex growled deep in his throat. There were a great many other things he wanted to ask. But he said only, "No, Father. I'm sorry I bothered you."

"You may contact me this way any time, Drex." Martok hesitated, then "You are still my son. Nothing will change that. I will die for you, and I would expect you to do the same for me. But I expect you to find your own honor. And, Drex?"

"Yes, Father?"

"You don't have to prove your worthiness to anyone.

You just have to do your duty, whether it's on the Gorkon or on Hudyuq. The rest of it will take care of itself."

"Father, why did you make that petaq part of our House?"

The words came out in a rush, and Drex wished he could have called them back. It was the one question he desperately wanted answered, yet the one question he could not ask.

But now he had asked it.

"_I_ assume you mean Worf," Martok said dryly. "You objected to my bringing him into the family from the beginning."

"I never said anything, Father, but--"

"You did not need to. Your attitude spoke volumes." Martok sighed. " know what happened between you on Deep Space Nine, my son. But what you must understand is that Worf saved more than my life--he saved my honor. And his disgrace from the empire was due to his opposing an action that was engineered by that--that creature that took my place."

"He betrayed the empire, Father--twice!"

"He accepted discommendation the first time to protect the empire. He accepted the second disgrace because he could not support an action that he thought would destroy us. He has always been loyal to our people, even though he was not raised among us. He has proven his worth, to me, and to the empire." Martok leaned forward again. His voice deepened into an almost-growl. " Which is more than you have done, my son. You have been given every opportunity. I suggest that you stop whining about the inequities of life, go to Hudyuq, and start taking advantage of those opportunities. Screen off."

Drex stared at the blank screen for several minutes.

Then he went to pack his belongings for the trip to Hudyuq.

Leskit started to put the neck bone necklace over his head, then changed his m ind. Perhaps it's time I stopped wearing the trophies of a war that has ended. He started to pack it with his other belongings.

Then he remembered what Kurak had said about how seeing the necklace made her feel.

Then he remembered what Kurak had done after she said that.

With a smile, he put the necklace on over his head.

The door chime rang. "Enter."

Kurak came in. To Leskit's dismay, she looked--well, the way she always looked, except for those few glorious hours in her quarters.

"You're leaving," she said in an almost accusatory tone.

"Yes. I'm on the transport going to Hudyuq so I can report to the Rotarran."

"You didn't tell me you were leaving."

Leskit frowned. "Didn't I? I suppose not. I have to confess, it wasn't foremost in my thoughts. Does it matter? Even if this assignment wasn't temporary, I might've been transferred anyhow. It happens."

Kurak let out a long breath through her clenched teeth. It made a slight whistling sound. "Perhaps."

"No " about it." Leskit grabbed her shoulders. "Kurak, we're in the Defense Force. We go where we are told. That is the way of things."

"So your pursuit of me was, what? A desire to get through the shielding of the impenetrable engineer? A wager among the bridge crew, perhaps?"

Leskit looked down at Kurak's brown eyes, which blazed with the fire that had attracted her to him in the first place.

"No. I simply saw someone I wanted to pursue, and pursued her. No more, no less."

"And now that you've gotten me, you're casting me aside?"

Rolling his eyes, Leskit let go of her shoulders and stomped across the room. "I don't believe this! Don't tell me you're going to insist that we take the oath or something equally ridiculous. For one thing, I'm mated, remember? The fact that she and I haven't spoken since the night our son was conceived doesn't change that."

Kurak shook her head and gripped her arm at the wrist

"I should have known better. I told myself to simply serve and get out as soon as possible. To form no attachments. Instead, this happens. This is why I didn't want to join in the first place." Walking back to her, Leskit said, "Kurak, it was what it was. We both enjoyed it. Perhaps we'll have the chance to do it again." He broke into a grin. "At least I hope so."

Kurak stared up at him. Her face seemed to be warring with itself, fighting it out between a scowl and a laugh.

After several seconds, to Leskit's relief, the laugh won. "What shall I do with you, Lieutenant?"

"That depends, Commander. What are you doing for the next few hours?"

"I'm on duty, I'm afraid. My assistant has been promoted to emperor," she said bitterly, "and while I'm happy to be rid of that todsah, he's the second engineer I've lost on this mission. I'm shorthanded, so I need to get back to engineering for several hours. When does the transport leave?"

Leskit shook his head. "Less than several hours from now."

"Pity." And now she smiled that smile that Leskit was sure he was the only person on the ship to ever have seen. "Perhaps some other time."

"Perhaps."

"Or perhaps I will curse your name and never speak to you again." Laughing, Leskit said, "I believe that's what my mate said to me the last time we spoke."

"A wise woman, I'd say." She moved back to the door. "Good-bye, Leskit."

"Good-bye, Kurak."

She left without a backward glance, no doubt to terrorize the remaining engineers. Leskit wondered if he'd ever see her again, and how she would feel. He suspected that neither of them would know the answer to that until it happened.

Ah, well, he thought, fingering the Cardassian neck bones he wore. It was worth it to hear her laugh.

Re'Trenat had to admit to liking the idea of being a minister. In fact,

Prime Minister em'Rlakun had insisted that re'Trenat be given a ministry. Governor Tiral objected, of course, but Ambassador Worf pointed out that the Klingons no longer had any say in the matter-although the appointment would have to, technically, come from Emperor Vail.

Everyone insisted that Vail was a Klingon, but re'Trenat almost didn't believe it. He didn't look or talk like any Klingon he'd seen, and he'd seen plenty.

The new emperor strode into the council chamber holding several pad ds and looking lost inside his thermal suit--it looked like he had taken Tiral's. In any case, it was several sizes too large. The other ministers were already present, and hadn't bothered to wait for him before starting business--his was only a ceremonial presence after all.

Em'Rlakun was discussing trade issues when Vail came in. "Ah, Emperor Vail. Thank you for joining us. If you'll just sit over there," she said, indicating the chair that had been brought for him and placed in a corner. The rest of them sat on cushions arranged in a large circle.

Several pad ds and some bowls of fish sat in the center. "Your first order of business will be to officially make re'Trenat the new minister of defense. He'll be supervising the military."

Vail nodded. "That makes good sense. I will take care of that, but--"

"Thank you, Vail."

"I believe that should be

"Your Eminence," should it not? That is how you address your emperors, correct?" Unable to contain a laugh, re'Trenat said, "He has a point. Although, by that logic, we should rename him me'Grmat XX, shouldn't we?"

"That would not send the message that we are still part of the Klingon Empire," one of the other ministers said. "I'd just as soon not draw attention to ourselves now."

"I don't think it's appropriate to call him

"Your Eminence,"

" em'Rlakun said coldly.

"What about

"Your Majesty," then?" Vail said. "I like the sound of that."

"We will take it under advisement." Em'Rlakun was beginning to sound impatient. "Now we have several other issues to get through, so if you don't mind--"

"I do not mind at all." Vail flipped through his pad ds looking for one. "In fact, I wanted to mention a couple of other issues, myself."

Eyes widening, em'Rlakun said, "You wanted--?"

"Yes, I did."

He got up and moved his chair into the circle, discommoding two other ministers, who growled in the backs of their throats.

Now this is interesting, re'Trenat thought with no small amusement So much for our "ceremonial" emperor.

"I'm glad you are all here, actually," Vail was saying. "I have been looking over the specs for your on-planet transportation system. It is not bad, but I feel there are many obstacles that need to be overcome.

I have some ideas for how to defeat this particular foe ..."

Worf packed his belongings into his duffels. Yet again I move on, he thought. This time, he would go to the Federation embassy on Qo'nos, where he would probably, finally, settle down--for the first time, really, since the Enterprise-ˆ) on which he'd served for over seven years was destroyed. Even his tenure on Deep Space Nine was not constant, as he spent so much time on the Defiant, and then constantly moving around during the war.

Wu was presently in engineering, sending Worf's final report on the tad mission to Minister TLatrek. He was sure the Vulcan woman would be pleased. Against all odds, he'd managed to find a solution that satisfied both governments, not to mention the al'Hmatti.

It was not a glorious battle. It was not a mission that would ever be enshrined in song. Indeed, the very solution meant that the details would need to remain shrouded in mystery. Even the battles that were fought--by the Gorkon and by Worf himself--were hardly the stuff of legends. Captain Klag had fought only Kreel, and Worf merely saw combat with a ragtag group of rebellious jeghpu'wl'. In the end, he had won the day with his mind, not with his physical prowess.

Still, the day was won. The mission was accomplished. Duty was fulfilled.

Worf picked up his and Jadzia's wedding picture from its place beside the bed.

Over a decade earlier, Lieutenant Tasha Yar, the Enterprise 's security chief, had been killed doing her duty. Yar had been an honored comrade, and Worf had been glad that she died as well as she did. He

had no doubt that she went to Sto-Vo-Kor and more than held her own amongst the honored dead. Captain Picard made Worf the acting chief of security, and eventually made the position permanent. He had remained in that capacity until the ship's destruction. He had always viewed what he did as security chief as a way of honoring Yar's memory.

When she died, K'Ehleyr had been the Federation ambassador to the Klingon Empire. For that matter, Curzon, the host of the Dax symbiont prior to Jadzia, had served as a diplomat on behalf of the Federation, including to the empire.

Once again, Worf was able to honor the memory of someone he cared about by taking over their work. Only this time it meant a great deal more.

As he packed away the picture, the door chime rang. "Enter."

To Worf's surprise, it was Klag. "Captain," Worf said neutrally.

"We will be arriving at Qo'nos shortly, Ambassador," Klag said. Worf noticed that he had some kind of device attached to his right shoulder. Noticing Worf's gaze falling on it, Klag said, "It is a neural stimulator. Dr. B'Oraq said it is to prepare the nerves that have been deadened for use again." At Worf's confused look, he added, "I am getting a new arm."

Worf blinked. "That is a very--surprising decision, Captain."

"You disapprove?"

"No. I applaud your courage. I've spent all my life with Federation medicine, and I have come to appreciate it--and what B'Oraq is doing. I can only hope your getting a prosthetic will not do more harm than good."

Klag shook his head. "That is all that can ever be hoped. However, I am not getting a prosthetic--I am receiving a transplant."

Worf frowned. "A transplant?"

"Yes. My father recently died, and I am receiving his good right arm.

It is an arm that served in the Defense Force for three decades. Much more worthy of a warrior than a piece of machinery."

"Perhaps," Worf said, nodding. It was a peculiar attitude, but Worf found himself understanding it more than he expected to. "What is it that you want?"

Klag hesitated. "I wanted to wish you farewell, Ambassador. And to apologize."

Worf blinked in surprise. Klingon warriors rarely apologized. "For what?"

"I forgot Kahless's words ' warrior's heart is inside." It is not how you got your position that matters, it is what you do with it. And despite all the obstacles--including me--you accomplished your mission."

Worf placed his mek'leth in his duffel, then closed it.

"Not without help. Your support in the end was invaluable. And if you had not brought the situation to the High Council's attention in the first place, things might have deteriorated further on tad."

Klag nodded. "Perhaps." He stood up straight. "Qapla', Ambassador. I look forward to serving with you again. Perhaps we shall die together."

"If so, then we will both die well. Qapla'."

With that, Klag turned and left.

Wu arrived a moment later. "We've pulled into orbit around Qo'nos, sir. Are you all packed?"

"Yes. We are done here."

Smiling, Wu said, "Excellent. It's early evening on the surface, so you'll be able to meet the staff over dinner at the embassy. They've prepared a full meal in your honor. Oh, and you'll be happy to know that I had a large supply of prune juice ordered and sent to the embassy galley. I'm told it will be available tonight."

Worf put his hand on Wu's shoulder. "You have done fine work, Wu."

"I endeavor to give satisfaction, sir."

Leading the way out of their quarters, Worf headed toward the transporter room.

They passed Rodek in the corridor. "Ambassador," the lieutenant said, inclining his head.

A fist of ice clenched Worf's heart. He had been avoiding Rodek for most of this mission. Since the first battle against the Kreel, when Rodek had proved himself to be so much less Kurn ... But is he? Is it truly fair to compare them? They shared the same body, but Rodek was not Kum--that was the whole point of the exercise, after all. And Kurn had wanted to die, and so, for all intents and purposes, Worf did kill him. If anything, he should have rejoiced that Rodek was so much different than his brother.

Rodek had stopped walking and was staring at Worf-and only then did Worf realize that he was staring also. "Ambassador, why do you constantly look at me that way?" The question was one step short of a challenge. If Rodek did not like Worf's answer, he would probably take that last step.

"My apologies."

"I do not want the mewling apologies of a Federation lackey, Ambassador." For the first time, there was a trace of Kurn's old fire.

"You of all people should know of my--condition. It has been difficult for me to be part of a society that I only know from educational tapes and half remembered instincts. Most of my shipmates have learned to accept my--reticence as part of who I am. I would expect you, who were there when I lost my memories, to do the same, and not treat me like some kind of curiosity."

"I do not think of you that way. You--you simply remind me of someone else."

"Really?" Rodek did not sound convinced. "Who might that be?"

"Someone close to me who--who died. You and he share certain facial expressions. It is sometimes like looking at a warped reflection of him. It was not my intention to give offense."

"Good. This time, I will not take any. If we ever meet again, Ambassador, do not look upon me as anything but a warrior."

"Of that, Lieutenant, you can be sure."

Rodek shook his head, and continued down the corridor.

Worf called out his name.

"Yes?" Rodek said, stopping and turning around.

"Qapla', Lieutenant. Continue to serve this vessel well."

Sounding almost grudging, Rodek said, "Qapla', Ambassador."

Worf did not feel any better as he watched Rodek turn the corner.

Wu also watched the lieutenant walk off, then turned to Worf. "If I may ask, sir, who is it that the lieutenant reminds you of?"

"You may not ask."

"Very good, sir." They continued to the transporter room. To Worf's surprise, Krevor was waiting for them there.

"Bekk," he said. "Your life is no longer mine--I have relinquished it to Captain Klag."

"I know, sir," she said respectfully. "I merely wished to see you off.

I am glad I was able to help defend you, and I hope I have the opportunity to die for you again." Unlike their first meeting, this time Krevor sounded like she actually meant it.

"If so, I would be honored," Worf said. "Qapla', Bekk."

"Qapla', Ambassador."

Worf stepped onto the platform, Wu next to him. "Initiate transport."

Then, in a red glow, he left the Gorkon, and went on to his next duty.

About the Author

Rocketed to Earth as an infant to escape the destruction of his home planet KEITH R A. Decandido was raised by a pack of feral librarians. As a teenager, he was bitten by a radioactive editor, and given powers far beyond those of normal word smiths Swearing to use his powers only for personal profit, he became a writer, editor, and book packager.

He scripted the Star Trek The Next Generation comic book miniseries Perchance to Dream, co-developed Star Trek S. C E. and wrote the S. C E. ebook Fatal Error, and is the author of the Star Trek Deep Space Nine novel in the Gateways crossover (due Fall 2001) and the cross series duo logy Star Trek The Brave and the Bold (due some time in 2002). His other books include the best selling Buffy the Vampire Slayer tomes The Watcher's Guide (with Christopher Golden and Nancy Holder) and The Xander Years, Vol. 1; the Farscape novel House of Cards; the Spider-Man novel Venom's Wrath (with Jose" R. Nieto); and two Young Hercules novels.

Keith is the percussionist and backup vocalist for the Don't Quit Your Day Job Players, an acclaimed rock blues country band that released its second CD, Blues Spoken Here, in 1999. Keith also maintains the band's web site at www. dqydjp. com .

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